



## Closing the Opportunity Gap for America’s Middle School Students

The undersigned organizations represent a coalition of national, state, and local groups that work in education and child and youth development, with a particular focus on expanding learning opportunities through new school designs and out-of-school-time programs. Collectively, **we represent millions of educators, parents, children, private-sector funders, volunteers, and community-based advocates.** We recognize that all students—regardless of income or background—need access to high-quality, real-world learning opportunities and mentorship that will help put them on a path to success.

All children need to be inspired through their education and surroundings to develop the necessary academic and social-emotional skills to be college and career ready. Yet income and background often limit access, especially to high-quality programs. Upper-income families have tripled their investment in their children’s education in a generation—**amounting to a gap of 6,000 hours of extra learning by 6th grade.** Lower-income children count on public schools, even though most students only spend 20% of their waking hours in the classroom. To shift this trend, schools and community organizations like ours across the country are collaborating to expand learning opportunities for low-income students, with a special focus on the critical, but often neglected, middle school years.

As a leading candidate for the office of President of the United States, we urge you to call for innovation and alignment of our education system to a 21st Century global economy. An effective platform for educational opportunity and equity must **expand learning time, make learning more relevant, and involve citizens and residents of this country in the shared enterprise of education.** Only by critically rethinking and boldly re-imagining the basic structures of education, can we advance our educational system and develop a workforce that is prepared to meet the challenges of the global age.

In support of this vision, **we ask that you adopt the following policy strategies into your platform:**

1. **Encourage schools to leverage human capital to expand learning opportunities:** Through creative school designs that bring in caring adults through community partnerships with non-profits, businesses, and national service programs like AmeriCorps and VISTA, we can provide critical support to schools and high-quality expanded learning opportunities and mentorship for youth in underserved communities.
2. **Raise awareness of the middle school years:** Neuroscience research demonstrates that crucial brain development occurs during adolescence, making middle school a critical time to engage students and set them on a path to a successful transition to high school and beyond. Middle school students need to develop strong inter-personal and academic skills as a foundation for higher-level critical thinking and skill development in high school.
3. **Encourage public-private partnerships:** Many of the most effective expanded learning and mentorship opportunities for our students, particularly in the STEM fields, come through close partnerships between public schools, businesses, trade associations, and universities in their communities.
4. **Support investing in what works:** Successful education programs are based on research and evaluation, knowledge exchange, innovation, and continuous improvement. We have the tools to know what works for our students, and we need to invest in programs that provide the greatest outcomes for them.

### Challenges Facing the US Education System and Economy

### ***The Learning Opportunity Gap***

The 6,000 hour learning gap between high-income and low-income students will only continue to worsen the achievement gap and limit future possibilities for low-income students. Even if our students were truly on a level playing field and school days across the country were equal, children in high-income families would still have access to activities outside of school, such as sports, music lessons, language lessons, mentors, academic tutoring, summer camps, and career exploration opportunities that build academic, leadership, and social-emotional skills. Children from low-income families often lack access to these very same activities and this leads to drastically unequal opportunities.



Many studies show that expanding time for student learning has an impact on student achievement—particularly for at-risk students.<sup>ii</sup> By expanding the learning day and creating summer learning opportunities, more students can have access to academic support, enrichment activities, and mentoring. Non-profit organizations, like the ones listed below, not only partner with schools to significantly extend the school day and year for all students, but also bring in additional resources and capacity by way of full-time national service members, volunteers, and other community partnerships.

### ***The Middle School Gap***

Middle school is a critical time to engage students in hands-on, applied learning in order to spark moments of discovery that can lead to unlocking lifelong passions. The adolescent brain goes through a critical neurological transition during middle school years. The brain “sprouts” new connections, which become hard-wired as adolescents engage creatively and navigate new social dynamics. Rather than harnessing this creative energy, across the country, school systems record “achievement dips” during adolescence including drops in grades, test scores, attendance, and engagement. That’s why interventions at this age can be so important.

Despite the critical need for engaging students in middle school to get them on a path to success in high school and beyond, we see a lack of investment in proven interventions that support students during the middle schools years. According to a study by the Alliance for Excellent Education, declines in funding exacerbate the problem of the “missing middle”, which refers to the inequitable distribution of federal funds between grade spans. In FY15, federal funding for grades 6-8 was estimated at \$2.5 billion, compared to \$31 billion for postsecondary education. Moreover, the Alliance for Excellent Education research shows that the current federal strategy of investing in the early years and in postsecondary education, while largely skipping over middle and high schools, is unlikely to yield great returns.<sup>iii</sup>

### ***The STEM Workforce Development Gap***

Hands-on learning opportunities are perhaps most important in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), given the skills required for mastery and the need for passionate STEM professionals in the future. The U.S. economy will require more than nine million STEM professionals by 2022, but currently only 18 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded are in STEM subjects, meaning that we are producing fewer than 300,000 college graduates in STEM majors each year for these critically



important jobs. Additionally, only two percent of Latinos and three percent of African Americans have earned a college degree in STEM by age 24.

Providing quality access to STEM education and careers to all children—especially underrepresented and underserved children—is an economic and social justice imperative. A stronger and more inclusive STEM talent pipeline is directly linked to our country’s broader challenge of unequal opportunity. High-quality, hands-on learning opportunities, particularly during middle school, can expose students to professions through career exploration at an earlier age.

**ExpandedED Schools** partners with premiere science institutions like the New York Hall of Science to train classroom teachers and after-school educators on how to plan and facilitate design challenges that build students' engineering and design skills, as well as their confidence, motivation, and interest in science. Joint professional development, planning, and collaboration means funds are used effectively and lessons are amplified throughout an expanded learning day.

### ***Sustainability of High-Quality Programs***



A 2015 study by Education Resource Strategies found that most schools are challenged to implement and sustain high-quality expanded learning opportunities in a world of existing policy and funding constraints. Districts and schools need more flexibility in how they can use time, talent, and technology, as well as an increase in funding for schools with the highest concentration of need.<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, the way money is spent to provide education and other types of services is not always aligned with what is best for students, or what is proven to drive positive impact. There is a need for a stronger movement, culture, and policy environment for evidence-based practices and investing in what works.

### **Solutions and Examples of Impact**

High-quality expanded learning opportunities, which include programs **that integrate academics, enrichment, and skills development** through experiences that make learning relevant and engaging for children, and are delivered through a variety of proven and effective strategies outside of the traditional school day—before school, after school, and summer—or within an expanded day, week, or year model have proven to help close the opportunity gap.

High-quality expanded learning programs:

- Offer a range of activities that capture student interest and strengthen student engagement in learning, and are aligned to content covered during the school day in order to promote higher attendance, reduce risk for retention or dropout, and make graduation more likely;
- Actively address the specific learning needs and interests of all types of students, especially those who may benefit from approaches and experiences not offered in traditional classroom settings;

In 2011, Lawrence Public Schools (LPS), ranked in the bottom one percent of MA districts for math and English language arts (ELA) proficiency. A new law enacted in 2010 enabled the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to take over “chronically underperforming” districts and place them into state receivership. **The National Center on Time & Learning** supported the intensive planning process to create a new school design that better met the needs of students and teachers. One of the schools involved, the Guilmette Elementary School, has seen particularly impressive gains. After two years of its redesigned schedule, 51 percent of Guilmette’s third- and fourth-graders were proficient in reading in 2015, a 15-percentage point increase over 2013. Sixty-seven percent of third- and fourth-graders were proficient in math, a nine-point bump over 2013 – and 26 points higher than 2012 – thus outperforming the state by eight points.



- Are delivered in strong partnerships with community-based organizations, higher education, or industry groups that offer students engaging enrichment activities that contribute to a well-rounded education; and
- Are assessed based on their quality and the educational value they provide for students and families.

As candidate for President of the United States, you can take the following steps to help close the opportunity gap for our students most in need.

**Encourage Schools to Leverage Human Capital to Expand Learning Opportunities**

Our coalition is demonstrating how communities can blend public and private resources to expand and sustain learning time for the students who need it most. Schools, nonprofits, and other partners are increasingly sharing responsibility for the cost of expanded learning and working to achieve common goals for student success.

In addition, national service plays a critical role in providing cost-effective, quality educational opportunities in schools across the country.<sup>v</sup> Each year, one million students drop out of school, which is projected to cost the nation \$154 billion in lost tax revenue and increased social services. National service provides a cost-effective tool to help solve some of our country’s biggest challenges. Non-profits and community-based organizations are using human capital, made possible by the Corporation for Community and National Service (CNCS), to educate students for the 21st Century, assist veterans and military families, help rebuild after disasters, and promote health and well-being.

The federal AmeriCorps program, administered by CNCS, provides a cost-effective solution for community-based organizations to add much needed capacity to support schools in need of additional resources. By creating jobs and providing pathways to opportunity for young people entering the workforce, AmeriCorps helps young people stay in school, learn valuable work skills, earn money for education, and develop an appreciation for citizenship. By making a commitment to supporting national service and the expansion of AmeriCorps, you can help galvanize support for a key lever for social change and capacity building in all communities.



Public-private models, like **BELL** (Building Educated Leaders for Life) and its summer learning partnerships, are enabling schools across the country to engage thousands of middle school students in evidence-based learning experiences that increase student achievement and prepare them to succeed in high school and beyond. Community partners also bring a spirit of innovation and improvement that yields important evidence about what works, insight into best practices, and valuable resources for serving students and families.

**City Year** is an education-focused national service organization that partners with 292 high-need public schools nationwide. Highly trained teams of City Year AmeriCorps members provide individual student and whole school supports that help students develop academic and social-emotional skills and improve school climate and culture. City Year’s service model addresses the early warning indicators that research shows can identify students who are at risk of dropping out. A recent third-party evaluation found that schools that partner with City Year are twice as likely to improve on state English Language Art assessments and three times more likely to improve student proficiency rates in math, compared to non-City Year partner schools.

### **Raise Awareness of the Middle School Years**

Middle school years are a critical transition time for students, but often overlooked. Access to high-quality academic and enrichment programming for middle school students should be an important focus within communities and among policy makers. Studies show that attendance, grades, test scores, and behavior during the middle grades all predict students' performance in high school—and their odds of graduating. High-quality expanded learning opportunities during the critical middle school years can put students on a path to success in high school and beyond. When students participate in our programs, they benefit from immediate gains in core academic skills and self-confidence, which translate into increased success in high school.<sup>vi</sup>

Using your various platforms to raise awareness on the importance of middle school will help policymakers at all levels prioritize this often-neglected age group. Also, messaging middle school and high school improvement and redesign as one movement aimed at the same goal can help focus our attention on interventions that support a successful transition into middle school and into high school.

### **Encourage Public-Private Partnerships**

Mentorship is a powerful way to bring volunteer experts into high-need schools, where they are supported by trained staff as they share what they know and love with students, to help meet 21st Century workforce challenges such as the STEM pipeline issue. Through public-private partnerships, community organizations like ours bring thousands of volunteer professionals into schools to bring high-quality mentorship experiences to students across the country.

Public-private partnerships, like **Citizen Schools**, bring approximately 4,300 volunteers into high-need schools to teach apprenticeship courses—approximately half of which are in STEM subjects and taught by scientists, engineers, and mathematicians, and more from leading corporations across the country—bringing authentic expertise and passion for STEM to the school and building excitement for STEM among students. Student surveys administered by Citizen Schools show that students who participated in STEM apprenticeships reported interest in STEM at more than twice national rates, suggesting high potential to help schools close STEM inspiration and achievement gaps. **US2020**, an initiative of Citizen Schools, is growing the national supply and demand for STEM mentors by partnering with Fortune 500 companies and best-in-class education partners. US2020 is matching skilled volunteers with these quality programs and creating evaluation systems to measure volunteer and student impact.

You can help to grow the STEM mentoring movement by convening stakeholders from the private, non-profit, and public sector to join in this critical work.



By targeting this cognitive window, organizations like **Spark**, a national nonprofit youth mentoring organization, help young people develop skills for success. Take Kalin, for example, an Oakland, CA student. When he started 8th grade, Kalin was demonstrating data-driven indicators linked to straying off-track. Kalin completed two Spark apprenticeships with Oakland-based companies. As he built valuable skills such as programming, communication, and project management, Kalin began to engage more in school, with measurable results. Over the course of the year, his GPA more than doubled, from 1.5 to 4.0.

**Support Investing in What Works**

The use of evidence to inform policy and practice can both improve student outcomes and increase the return on federal education investments, as more resources are spent on programs and practices known to make a positive impact. Through federal programs like Investing in Innovation (i3), the federal government has funded several promising and proven interventions, evaluated them, and created a community to share best practices and lessons learned. The newly reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act makes a significant commitment to the use of evidence to inform policy and practice.

**Higher Achievement** is a rigorous, year-round program that has proven statistical significance on math and reading test scores, high school choice, and family engagement. The results of a randomized control trial by MDRC led to a significant i3 grant. This \$12 million investment will enable Higher Achievement to double the number of middle school students it serves, further align to state standards, evaluate the work, and disseminate best practices to the field.

We ask that you continue this bipartisan effort and demonstrate your support for investing in what works in order to give students across the country the best chance for success.

We appreciate your consideration of this education platform. We are confident these actions can lead to significant advances in student outcomes, as well as provide critical opportunities that all children need to reach their full potential. We would be happy to provide any further information or additional assistance throughout your campaign.

Sincerely,



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## **Appendix: Specific Tactics for Strategies Mentioned Above**

1. ***Encourage schools to leverage human capital to expand learning opportunities:*** Through creative school designs that bring in caring adults through community partnerships with non-profits, businesses, and national service programs like AmeriCorps and VISTA, we can provide critical support to schools and high-quality expanded learning opportunities and mentorship for youth in underserved communities.
  - a. Make a commitment to supporting the Corporation for National and Community Service and the expansion of AmeriCorps so that it meets numbers authorized in the Serve America Act.
  - b. Employ national service to address the goals of government agencies cost-effectively, particularly in the area of education and service.
  
2. ***Raise awareness of the middle school years:*** Neuroscience research demonstrates that crucial brain development occurs during adolescence, making middle school a critical time to engage students and set them on a path to a successful transition to high school and beyond.<sup>vii</sup> Middle school students need to develop strong inter-personal and academic skills as a foundation for higher-level critical thinking and skill development in high school.
  - a. Explicitly target funding for evidence-based out-of-school-time interventions, including listing middle grades as a priority area within flexible funding streams or block grants.
  - b. Message middle school and high school improvement and redesign as one movement, and focus on interventions that support a successful transition into middle school and into high school.
  - c. Explicitly target funding for evidence-based interventions that engage community organizations and put students on a path for successful transition into middle school and into high school.
  - d. Hold a White House convening on mentorship for middle school students.
  
3. ***Encourage public-private partnerships:*** Many of the most effective expanded learning and mentorship opportunities for our students, particularly in the STEM fields, come through close partnerships between public schools, businesses, trade associations, or universities in their communities.
  - a. Help scale and sustain proven programs through on-going public and private investment of financial, in-kind, technological, and human resources.
  - b. Engage professionals, particularly those in growing industries such as STEM-related fields, to mentor, advise, and support learning for students, teachers and community educators in schools and expanded learning settings.
  
4. ***Support investing in what works:*** Successful education programs are based on research and evaluation, knowledge exchange, innovation, and continuous improvement. We have the tools to know what works for our students, and we need to invest in programs that provide the greatest outcomes for them.
  - a. Prioritize evidence-based programming and interventions in both federal formula funding and funding for national activities.
  - b. Tie payments to providers for results achieved, and support a *Community Solutions Fund* that would provide matching grants to venture philanthropies seeking to grow evidence-based programs.



## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> ExpandedED Schools by TASC. 2013 Annual Report: <http://www.expandedschools.org/2013-annual-report>

<sup>ii</sup> Child Trends. 2012. Expanding Time for Learning Both Inside and Outside the Classroom: A Review of the Evidence Base

<sup>iii</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education. *Never Too Late: Why ESEA Must Fill the Missing Middle*, May 2015. Available at: <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/nevertoolate/>

<sup>iv</sup> Feinburg, Randi, Kristen Farris, and Nisha Garg. *Putting the Pieces Together: Sustainable Funding for Expanded Time in Public Schools*. Education Resource Strategies, 2015. Available at: <http://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/2471-expanded-learning-time-citizen-schools-paper.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> America's Promise Alliance. 2014. The Role of National Service in Closing the Graduation Gap. <http://www.americaspromise.org/news/role-national-service-closing-graduation-gap>

<sup>vi</sup> National Abt Associates Evaluation (2010 – present): An ongoing national evaluation by external evaluator, Abt Associates, is producing promising evidence that Citizen Schools' full-grade Expanded Learning Time programs are increasing students' participation in college and career-oriented activities and their academic achievement. The study launched in 2010 and is assessing both implementation and impact relative to a set of matched comparison schools not adopting the Citizen Schools program. Key interim findings include: Students in Citizen Schools ELT schools were more likely to report having participated in activities to learn about college (70% vs. 38%) and careers (67% vs. 40%) than students at matched comparison schools. Participating in Citizen Schools' program was associated with an additional three months of learning in Math and two additional months of learning in math each year based on state achievement tests relative to what would be expected in the absence of the program. Abt Associates characterized the interim academic impact findings in this way: "In the context of other research about the impact of ELT on student achievement outcomes, the interim findings are quite promising. Few studies have found consistent positive outcomes, and the most positive findings to date, from the recent KIPP study (Tuttle et al., 2013) reflect implementation of a highly structured program model rather than the considerably more flexible Citizen Schools ELT model."

<sup>vii</sup> ExpandedED Schools by TASC. 2013 Annual Report: <http://www.expandedschools.org/2013-annual-report>