

Designing NextGen Solutions to Change the Odds for Kids

California's significant investments in expanded learning programs present a unique opportunity to rethink traditional structures of the school day and year. The current model, with its short school day and long summer break, is seen as outdated and inadequate. Despite challenges in shifting entrenched systems, California has a history of investment in expanded learning programs, now culminating in the multi-billion dollar Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELOP). However, despite this funding, districts have been slow to utilize the resources due to various concerns including spending flexibility, temporary nature of funds, and competing priorities.

Think Together, as a leading provider of expanded learning programs in California, seeks to leverage this opportunity to innovate around extended and improved learning time. They aim to integrate academic, social, emotional, and enrichment activities, breaking down traditional divides between the regular school day and afterschool programs. Their extensive experience, strong infrastructure, and positive track record position them to lead this innovation effort, with the goal of benefiting students across the state.

Drawing from research on the Science of Learning and Development and the impact of high-quality afterschool programs, **Think Together** emphasizes the importance of coherence in coordinating resources and efforts towards student learning and development. They plan to convene a group of practice and policy leaders to envision and conceptualize a reimagined learning day and year, utilizing frameworks such as the Coherence Hub to address fragmentation in the education landscape. Urgency is emphasized due to the current crisis in student engagement, learning loss, and mental health struggles, highlighting the need for collaboration with leaders committed to preserving expanded learning funds and improving the public education system in California.



California's Big Opportunity: Reimagining the Learning Day and Year



Background

With California's multi-billion dollar investments in expanded learning programs, there is a moment-in-time opportunity to leverage the heightened awareness of the value of afterschool and summer learning, the enormous increase in public funding, and updated policies on learning time to push the envelope on how we structure the learning day and year, as well as how we use increased time to improve learning and developmental outcomes.

It is widely understood that the current construct of U.S. public schools with a roughly 6-hour day and long summer break is woefully outdated and doesn't meet the needs of kids and families. However, this construct has been virtually impossible to shift given the deeply embedded systems and structures in place that have limited the potential for sustainable innovations. Through expanded learning investments, the learning day has been extended in many schools, but the historic delineation between what happens during the regular school day and what happens after the bell rings, persists. This commonly looks like different staff, different activities, different expectations, different funding streams, and different measures of success.

California has long been a leader in expanding the day with its investments in expanded learning going back to the late 90's with the After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnership (ASLSNP) program, which was expanded and renamed the After School Education and Safety (ASES) program with the passage of Prop 49 in the early 2000's. Today in California, with the advent of the multi-billion dollar Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELOP), there is not only an unprecedented amount of investment in expanded learning programs, there is a policy mandate for schools to operate for 9 hours per regular school day during the year, and provide at least 30 days of intersession programming. While this policy shift was driven to some extent by the child care crisis and the need to get families back into the workforce, it also builds upon a long and deep history of expanded learning policy and practice in California. California school districts (with some exceptions) have been wary of this new mandate for a longer day and year, and even though California is now in year three of implementing the ELOP, districts have been very slow to utilize these funds. A mix of circumstances contributes to this dilemma including lack of trust about the level of spending flexibility, concerns the funds are temporary, competing demands with other priorities, COVID recovery fatigue, declining enrollment, staffing shortages and more.

The Opportunity for Innovation

Think Together, as the largest expanded learning program provider in California, aims to catalyze this new policy and the dollars that come with it, to help the schools and districts they partner with truly innovate around a vision of increased and improved learning time. This vision places external, community-based program providers in a central role, and is focused on breaking down the old divides by creating true coherence and integration of academic, social and emotional learning, plus enrichment, youth development and leadership opportunities young people need to thrive. Think Together is uniquely positioned to facilitate this kind of innovation given their long history of leveraging public and private funds to serve students in under-resourced communities, their presence in 39 districts and 23 charter schools across the state serving 87,386 students, their strong quality improvement and data systems, and their record of positive results for students. In addition to facilitating this innovation work within their own network, their bigger vision includes sharing and spreading what is learned so that students across the state can benefit.



There is a wide body of research to draw from to support this work, including all that’s been learned from the [Science of Learning and Development](#) about the critical nature of relationship and connection to learning, and all the evidence on the impact of high-quality afterschool and summer programs on school attendance, persistence, social and emotional skills and wellness, school completion and more.

A foundational ingredient in any effort to create a reimagined and more effective learning day and year, is that of “coherence”—ensuring that all available human and financial resources and energy are coordinated, leveraged, and rowing in the same direction around student learning and development. This is exceptionally difficult to achieve in a system as complex as California’s public education system, but we know from experience in the expanded learning field that when school day and expanded learning staff and resources are aligned and complementary, it’s better for kids. For example, a best practice in the expanded learning field includes having a full-time site coordinator who is considered a core member of the school team, supports case management of students needing support, liaises with families, and aligns learning activities across the school day and after school.

There are school redesign examples nationally that offer learning opportunities for California. [The National Center for Time and Learning](#) made a concerted effort to implement a new extended day model in schools across multiple states. An important aspect of NCTL’s work was the use of community-based enrichment partners as critical to increasing learning time—both in the after school hours, and also during the regular school day, in order to free up teachers for planning and collaboration time. This use of enrichment partners throughout the day was a strategy to add time to the day, but it also brought other tangible assets such as relationships and experiences that students gain from access to enrichment and exposure to a different set of adult mentors. It is also useful to consider how high functioning Community Schools operate, how some charter schools have used their flexibility to redesign the learning day and year, and state examples such as the [Additional Days School Year](#) (ADSY) initiative in Texas.



Initial Actions

Think Together aims to convene a group of practice and policy leaders in the visioning and conceptualization of a reimagined learning day and year innovation effort. In the coming year, Think Together plans to convene a “Think Tank” of key thought partners to gather feedback, ideas, consider current context, assess opportunities and barriers, and who else should be engaged. As part of this role, Think Together will employ a framework for ensuring that this work is conducted with strong coherence, given the complexity of California’s education landscape. A likely tool to be utilized is the developed after extensive research to address fragmentation [The Coherence Framework-Coherence Hub](#), developed after extensive research on addressing fragmentation (Ed First, Council of Chief State School Officers). There is also strong commitment to solicit early feedback and ideas from practitioners, and some form of Professional Learning Community is likely to be developed in order to cultivate real-time, field-driven learning time and structure innovations.

Given the current crisis of student disengagement, learning loss, mental health struggles and more, together with a narrow window of current leadership in California committed to preserving expanded learning funds, there is urgency to this work. Think Together is eager to collaborate with California leaders who share their vision for a stronger, more equitable and impactful public education system for all.

thinktogether.org

