Expanded Learning Requires Expanded Thinking

How do people think about education? Several foundations – including Ford, W.K. Kellogg, NoVo, Nellie Mae, Hewlett and Mott – are working with the FrameWorks Institute to find and shape the answers.

The research pays special attention to issues such as learning; assessment; disparities in educational outcomes; the structures of the education system; interventions aimed at improving the education system; and the collective benefits of education. The foundations hope to insure that a coherent narrative that connects these aspects of the education system can be communicated to voters, policymakers, parents, business leaders and educators.

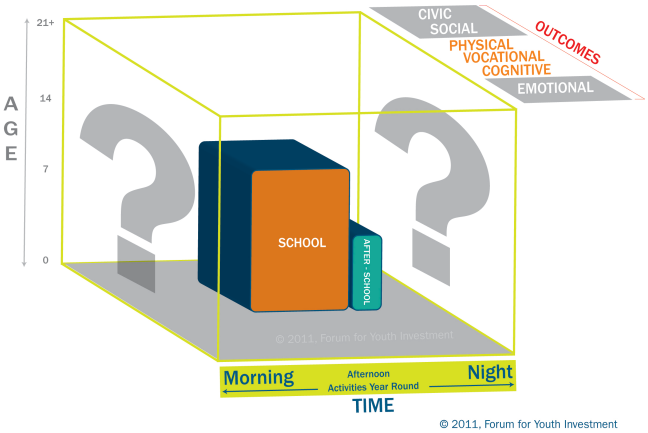
One of the leaders interviewed was Karen Pittman, co-founder and CEO of the Forum for Youth Investment. Here are portions of that interview, in which Karen stresses that we need to think about learning in its more intrinsic form, not about something that happens primarily in structures such as schools. (Illustrations have been added.)

For more on FrameWork's education research and publications, go here.

Q: In education circles there is a lot of talk about what kids learn and how learning happens. Is the expanded learning agenda getting the where and when questions on the table?

A: We haven't asked the how and why questions about learning enough. So the when and where questions either don't come up or they don't stick. The conversation about extended learning is still very school-centric and bound within a fairly restrictive definition of how learning happens and why.

Learning is an intrinsic thing that humans do. If kids are awake – whether they are two or 12 – they're learning and developing. Learning is intrinsically satisfying. But that can get lost when it is defined only in terms of academic content. When learning becomes too defined by content, the conversation about expanding when and where kids learn becomes a conversation about where to stick the content, and the intrinsic side can get lost.



School occupies only a small portion of developmental space in learning rich communities if we agree that learning starts at birth, happens all the time, and builds competence in multiple outcome areas. To expand learning opportunities communities need to put mechanisms in place to monitor the availability, accessibility and quality of programs and opportunities and to strengthen connections across the settings where young people learn and develop.

School only fills a small piece of that developmental space, but we spend very little time trying to understand, assess, improve and coordinate the learning that's going on in the rest of that space. As long as our definition of learning is driven by formal education and things like the common core and standardized tests, we're unlikely to capitalize on the opportunity presented by the rest of that time and space.

Q: What are the first steps to de-compartmentalizing learning?

A: One way is to put the learning that happens through high-quality programs and opportunities outside of school on par with K-12 learning. Another way is to bring [into schools] more of what these other practitioners have figured out about effective learning opportunities.

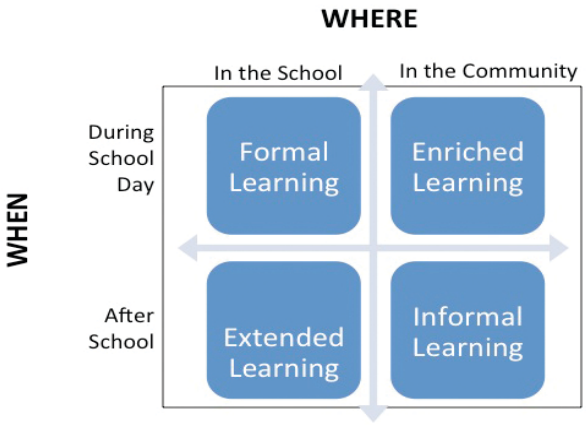
Reed Larson's research on intrinsic motivation is relevant here. In one study, middle school kids were given beepers so the research team could track what they were doing and how they were feeling. Each time he [Larson] beeped them, they responded to a couple of quick questions about what they were doing and their levels of concentration and motivation. When kids were in class, they weren't

motivated and they weren't concentrating. When they were with friends, they were motivated but not concentrating. When they were playing sports, they reported relatively high levels of both motivation and concentration. The highest levels of concentration and motivation were reported when youth were in structured informal learning environments where they had made choices about what they were doing and how to do it.

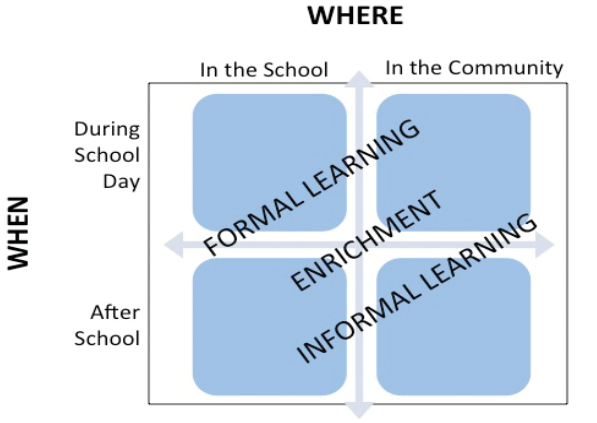
This doesn't mean we shut down schools and send everyone to youth programs, but it should make us think about how to bring higher levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement into schools. Schools are not monolithic. Some students certainly experience more engaging, motivating experiences than others. If you beeped kids who were in a magnet science program, they would probably be engaged. They would likely be in a different type of learning environment than kids in, say, a remedial English course. The most gifted and talented kids get more opportunities for this kind of engagement. Far too many others experience the other end of the spectrum.

I would flip the conversation about learning. The underlying assumption is that the stuff we want kids to learn is like medicine. If left to their own devices, they wouldn't learn it. We need to spend more time understanding how we can support intrinsic motivation.

Traditional assumptions about where, when and how learning happens.



Revised assumption: high-yield learning environments can be created in school and out.



Q: What does a classroom that promotes intrinsic motivation look like?

A: In an engaging classroom you will see desks pushed together, more team time, students working on group projects where the project on one table may be completely different from the project on the next table. Essentially, this is about effective project-based learning. Young people need opportunities to make meaningful decisions about topics they want to learn about, and then [they need] the supports to do something with that topic.

Once you show students that they can really learn whatever they want to learn and they experience that sense of mastery, they will learn because they enjoy feeling that sense of mastery. In that kind of environment, young people will trust an adult who says, "You need to learn this because …"

Q: There seems to be a notion in the education system that fairness is about having clearly defined standards and everyone learning the same thing. Do you see that as a problem?

A: Standards are good. We use standards in our work for all kinds of things. There is value, however, in broadening what gets included in standards, and providing genuine opportunities for students to get there through different paths. So we need youth to have basic reading and math skills, but we also need them to develop teamwork, communication and problem-solving skills, financial literacy, a solid work ethic. These are competencies that have multiple uses once you develop them and that employers say their incoming workforce often lacks.

There are examples of schools paying close attention to both content and competence. In the New Tech Network's high schools, half of a student's course grade is for based on mastery of the content, and the other half is for improvement

in different skills like teamwork, communication and initiative. Teachers' lesson plans address both content and the development of those core competencies.

Q: What do you think about the separation between the learning that goes on inside vs. outside of school?

A: When kids are in preschool, we stay true to an expanded definition of learning. Learning in the early years includes all of those things that allow kids to be curious and navigate their environment, and teachers and parents are considered equal partners in learning. When kids become school-aged, the definition gets restrictive. The word "learning" gets captured by school – and then suddenly everything else isn't thought of as learning.

When an uncle teaches his nephew how to tune an engine, does that get counted as learning? Maybe. Does it get the same respect as the learning that occurs when a teacher teaches you how to do long division? No. And yet when we do a simple exercise and ask people to reflect on the most powerful learning experiences they had as a young person, their answers are rarely about something they learned in school.

Q: What kinds of changes do you think need to happen in order to improve the quality of our education system?

A: Public education is absolutely critical to the American ideal, but there is room for reinvention. Look at other large public systems, like public health. The CDC [Centers for Disease Control] has reinvented itself many times, both in terms of how public health is defined and how the system is designed to address it. We haven't done the same level of redefinition and reinvention in public education. The system is defined more by buildings and schedules than by student learning needs and desires.

I would want to step back and think about what really works for kids and families. Research on everything from how kids learn to adolescent sleep patterns demonstrates that the system as currently conceived isn't working for many kids. But we have difficulty getting outside of the box. I'd like to get to a public education system that has standards, expectations and resources, but a little more flexibility in terms of how and where learning happens. We have the expertise and the technology to make public education a very different system while keeping its core intact.

***

To read more about this issue, see:

Learning Opportunities for Children and Youth: Expanding Commitments, Blurring the Lines, the Forum for Youth Investment, 2002.

When, Where, What and How Youth Learn, New Directions for Youth Development, Jossey Bass, 2004; edited by Karen Pittman, Nicole Yohalem and Joel Tolman.

Caution: Expanded Learning Time ≠ Expanded Learning, by Karen Pittman, 2011.