Harvard Family Research Project

Partnerships for Learning: Community Support for Youth Success

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Introduction

Partnerships for learning

Many educators are shifting away from the traditional public education model in which schools focus primarily on providing youth with a solid foundation in academics. Instead, they are moving toward a more comprehensive approach that supports youth's physical, social, and emotional needs in addition to their academic achievement.[1] In this model, educators are bringing together key players who provide a range of services to support learning, including families, school administrators, community-based organizations, health care providers, governmental agencies, and other institutions.

These diverse partners work together in what we are calling *partnerships for learning* to support children's development and reduce barriers to their overall success.[2] Through these partnerships, individual partners work with one another to combine resources strategically and align goals and curriculum.[3] In doing so, they create a seamless web of supports to provide children with a holistic learning experience that helps ensure positive academic and non-academic learning outcomes.[4]

Schools at the center: The community schools model

According to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, "When families learn together and where schools truly become the heart and center of a neighborhood—a community anchor—there are tremendous dividends for children."[5] In keeping with this view, *partnerships for learning* often work best when schools coordinate learning supports. The central role of schools in *partnerships for learning* is especially important in inner cities and low-income communities where children's lack of access to needed services, such as mental health care, tends to interfere with their learning. In these situations, schools play a vital role in connecting children with supports that ensure that they come to school safe and ready to learn.[6]

The community school, or full-service school, is an especially effective model for creating school-centered *partnerships for learning*. In this model, schools provide access to a broad range of complementary supports for children and families in the community. Although specific services vary from school to school, community schools typically offer those focused on quality education, youth development, physical and mental health, family support, family and community engagement, and community development. According to the Coalition for Community Schools, "A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources."[7]

In a study about transforming Chicago's low-performing schools, Anthony Bryk and his colleagues at the University of Chicago found that no single reform solution works: instead, efforts must be systemic. As part of these efforts, Bryk cites family–school–community connections as one of several elements necessary to achieve school success.[8] The community schools model directly responds to this need for family–school–community connections. In particular, this model has demonstrated success in increasing family engagement in their children's learning, as well as in improving student learning, attendance, behavior, and development.[9]

By offering an array of combined services, community schools are able to create five "conditions" that research indicates are necessary for youth to succeed:

- A core instructional program that includes qualified teachers, a challenging curriculum, and high standards and expectations for youth;

- Youth who are motivated and engaged in learning in and out of school;

- Services that address youth's and families' physical, mental, and emotional health needs;

- Mutual respect and effective collaboration among families and school staff; and

- Community engagement that promotes a safe, supportive, and respectful school climate and connects youth to a broader learning community.[10]

Coalition for Community Schools
www.communityschools.org
The Coalition for Community Schools, housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership, is an alliance of national, state, and local organizations in education K-16; youth development; community planning and development; family support; health and human services; government; and philanthropy, as well as national, state, and local community school networks.

Community schools in practice: The Elev8 Initiative

In this paper, we refer to specific features of Elev8, a community schools initiative, to illustrate what successful *partnerships for learning* look like in practice. The Elev8 initiative provides designated schools across the country with resources for the integrated delivery of learning, health, and family support services, along with resources for family and community engagement. We describe Elev8 in more detail in the Appendix.

This paper examines and shares important factors, or elements, that are key to developing successful *partnerships for learning*. We derive these elements from past research on community–school partnerships. To illustrate these elements, we offer specific examples from Elev8 schools based on ongoing evaluation work that several research organizations have conducted since the beginning of the initiative.[*] These examples include practices and challenges at Elev8 schools that can serve as guides for school districts and others considering implementing *partnerships for learning*. We summarize these elements and then describe them in detail with examples from the Elev8 schools. We also include resources related to establishing successful *partnerships for learning*. In forthcoming papers and reports, other researchers will share the social, emotional, and academic outcomes of Elev8 youth and their families (see Appendix).

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[*] We used a variety of data sources to inform this paper, including internal evaluation reports from local Elev8 evaluators, Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), and Public/Private Ventures dating back to the beginning of the initiative. In addition, HFRP conducted interviews and surveys of key Elev8 stakeholders, including Elev8 location directors and current local evaluators, and reviewed Elev8-related websites and documents. We cite external reports when relevant.

Key Elements of Successful Partnerships for Learning

Partnerships for learning are hard work and require that all partners involved—including school staff, community providers and members, and families—understand and adhere to strategies that encourage collaboration. Seven elements are particularly important in establishing successful and sustainable partnerships:[11]

1. **Shared vision of learning:** Partners share a common understanding of the goals and resources needed to support children's learning.

2. **Shared leadership and governance:** Partners have an equal say in leading efforts to support children and families.

3. **Complementary partnerships:** Partners share complementary skills and areas of expertise to create a seamless and comprehensive set of learning supports for children.

4. **Effective communication:** Partners communicate effectively and frequently to ensure they are aligning their activities and are working in harmony with one another.

5. **Regular and consistent sharing of information about youth progress:** Partners have access to crucial data that help them better understand the youth they serve.

6. **Family engagement:** Families serve as key partners to help address the complex conditions and varied environments where children learn and grow.

7. **Collaborative staffing models:** Schools and community organizations create staffing structures that intentionally blend roles across partners, so that staff work in multiple settings to provide adult support spanning school and non-school hours.

1   Shared Vision of Learning

Regardless of who takes the lead in starting the partnership, all partners must share ownership for the work, which requires that they have a shared vision based on a cohesive set of common goals. The more explicit the vision is, the more useful it is in helping guide the partners in their efforts to improve outcomes for youth. For example, Elev8 Baltimore and their partners created what they refer to as a "set of values" that encompasses their shared vision with their partners: leadership, learning, integrity and accountability, respect, and sustainability.[12] By establishing these values from the outset, the Elev8 Baltimore partners each have a clear understanding of their larger vision.

For community providers that are looking to create *partnerships for learning*, developing a shared vision begins with identifying schools that are most likely to understand the value of non-school supports and to see community partners as allies in their work. In many cases, the principal determines the level of support from the school. According to one local Elev8 evaluator, "the principal influences the extent to which external partners are integrated into the school. For instance, as the ultimate authority with respect to activities that occur within the school, the principal's duty includes ensuring the security of students, a concern that can compete with efforts to welcome and meaningfully integrate parents and external partners into the school."[13]

At the same time, community providers involved in *partnerships for learning* must respect the school's existing vision and be willing to work with the school to create a partnership structure that works for everyone. Buy-in from teachers and other school staff increases their involvement in, and ability to refer students for, partners' services. Partners can often win over teachers by demonstrating ways that they provide valuable services to students. For example, teachers at Elev8 schools often express appreciation for Elev8's extended-day tutoring, which they feel supports their classroom instruction, and for Elev8's school-based health centers, which they believe provides much-needed services to youth and their

families. Elev8 partners often work with school staff to align program offerings with the school's philosophy and curriculum content.

Also crucial to developing a shared vision is each partner's understanding of the ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds of the local community, as well as the specific cultural norms of the partner organizations. Program and school staff strengthen their collective efforts when they live in the communities they are serving, reflect the racial and ethnic make-up of those communities, and share the attitudes, beliefs, and values of those with whom they are working. In Baltimore, for example, all of the Elev8 schools are situated within the same community, and many of the Elev8 staff live there or very close by, which helps facilitate effective working relations among partners.

2 Shared Leadership and Governance

In order for *partnerships for learning* to succeed over time, partners must share leadership of all efforts, which requires that they be willing to let go of some of their own power and control. In these types of partnerships, partners often rely on a site director to implement the philosophy and vision, or on a coordinator who is responsible for ensuring that partners work with each other and with the host school. Individuals who serve in these roles must demonstrate strong leadership skills to bring together partners whose missions and philosophies may differ. Principals also provide pivotal leadership to help connect partner services with schools. In particular, across Elev8 schools, principals who value non-academic services typically have solid relationships with their Elev8 site directors, as well as with the parents and the community.[14] Parents and community members can also take on key leadership roles through involvement in local school councils and parent committees.

However, turnover in leadership positions, particularly among site directors and school principals, can serve as a barrier to successful partnerships. Elev8 schools often speak of this concern; as one Elev8 director noted, "site coordination is absolute and needs to be consistent."[15] In addition, schools across the U.S. often struggle with high principal turnover, a factor that frequently has implications for schools' relationships with community partners. These and other changes in leadership require significant time for each incoming administrator to get up to speed. In an effort to address this challenge, many Elev8 schools have stressed the importance of emphasizing strong relationships among all of the partners, so that the initiative can continue to operate successfully in the event that changes occur with site directors or principals.

3 Complementary Partnerships

The most successful *partnerships for learning* are composed of individual partners who each have their own distinct set of connections, information, and resources that they are willing to share with one another. Through such exchanges, *partnerships for learning* can widen their networks to create a web of complementary learning supports across multiple people and institutions to provide a seamless learning experience that addresses the complex conditions and variety of environments where children learn and grow.

To maximize these connections, *partnerships for learning* benefit from deliberate outreach to other potential partners who already have the resources, staff capacity, and institutional knowledge to align with the school and with other providers throughout the community. In Chicago, for example, Elev8 built on existing partnerships that started as part of the Local Initiative Support Corporation's New Communities Program, a community development initiative. Prior to Elev8 funding, community

members and agencies involved in the New Communities Program had undergone a community planning process that included developing "quality-of-life plans." These plans helped communities build partnerships at the local/city level to deal with community issues such as employment, parks and recreation, health care, and affordable housing. Familiarity through previously established relationships contributed to the trust among Elev8 partners. Similarly, Elev8 Oakland recruited AmeriCorps service members to work with the highest-need youth at each school. Because AmeriCorps is a well-established organization with an available team of volunteers, they are well-positioned to step in to work with Elev8 schools.

4 Effective Communication

For partners to work together in a coordinated manner, they must have effective communication structures and strategies in place. Outreach and informal correspondence help maintain these connections. For example, partners can invite one another to attend special events, correspond by e-mail, and check in as necessary. Establishing open lines of communication at the beginning of the partnership can be especially beneficial. For example, in Chicago, the Elev8 directors work closely with the schools to connect with new teachers and other staff soon after they are hired.

Finding time to communicate can be a challenge, but it is important that formal communications structures, such as participation in school leadership teams or newsletters addressed to a specific audience, are in place. These formal channels can ensure that partners have a regular way to communicate and to share feedback with one another. For example, Elev8 schools in Chicago hold monthly integrations meetings to update partners and to inform new staff of the current state of Elev8. In Oakland, Elev8 partners maintain a Coordination of Services Team

(COST), which includes the Elev8 project coordinator, family advocate, clinical case managers, mental health providers, administrators, afterschool providers, and other student support personnel. To meet the needs of each child they are tracking, COST members meet regularly to review caseloads, share information about each child, and provide referrals to appropriate services when needed. This structure allows providers to coordinate with one another, avoid duplication of efforts, and address any unmet needs.

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5 Regular and Consistent Sharing of Information about Youth Progress

Consistent sharing of data among partners provides value in *partnerships for learning*, whether the data involve information about youth's well-being, academic outcomes, or program evaluation results. Data sharing serves three major purposes in *partnerships for learning*:

1. To address youth's needs across learning settings by providing "the big picture" of what is happening in each child's life;

2. To assess whether the services provided are achieving what they intended and inform any improvements needed in these services; and

3. To demonstrate program or partnership results and accountability.

Privacy concerns, lack of trust, and limited time, however, can hamper or prevent information flow among partners. For this reason, it is particularly crucial for partners to be strategic and exercise good judgment in their data-sharing methods. To make the most effective use of data, partners must think through what information they need, and for what purposes; how easily available the data are; and how much time and resources they are willing to invest in gathering that information. To improve the coordination of their data sharing, Elev8 New Mexico hired a data specialist to develop a database for collecting and sharing data across partners.[16] Having a staff member devoted to this process has allowed for data sharing to move beyond discussions around a table to consistent data sharing with various state and local partners.

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In addition, partners benefit from developing multiple methods of obtaining information to provide a coordinated set of data sources. This set of data can feed into the partnership's efforts to support youth, improve programming, and demonstrate accountability. At cross-site meetings in Chicago, Elev8 partners review data dashboards, which provide graphical snapshots of an organization's key performance indicators. Partners can use these dashboards to discuss and plan program changes and continually bring data into their conversations. To coordinate the collection, sharing, and use of these multiple data sources, partners often develop Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)*: Elev8 New Mexico has developed MOUs with partner organizations as part of their new database system.[17]

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* A Memorandum of Understanding is a document describing an agreement between multiple parties. It should be specific and include requirements of the agreement and responsibilities of each party. See here for examples:
www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/H68_Nippert_SMU%20DISD%20MOU%20Clean%20Final.pdf and
www.communityschools.org/assets/1/AssetManager/CommunityPartnerMOA.pdf

6 Family Engagement

As vital partners in *partnerships for learning*, families play a pivotal role in helping to achieve the partnership's goals. In Elev8 schools, family engagement is essential to the success of the youth involved in the initiative as well as to the initiative itself. As equal partners in these efforts, families support youth's participation in services, for example, while service providers also have the responsibility of establishing trusting and effective relationships with families. These and similar arrangements are mutually reinforcing, ultimately strengthening ties that contribute to the success of the partnerships. In Oakland, Elev8 organizes numerous events, such as school improvement meetings, parent summits, and advisory dinners, where parents can participate in activities to support their children's learning, and where they can take on leadership roles, engage with one another, and raise concerns. The success of each program's parent engagement efforts often relies heavily on the relationships that develop between school staff and parents. Many parents involved with Elev8 Baltimore, for example, started to express pride in their affiliation with the initiative as a result of the positive connections they had made with Elev8 staff. The Elev8 Baltimore evaluator felt that local family engagement had reached a tipping point when Elev8 parents started encouraging other families to get involved.[18]

According to one Elev8 director, family engagement "is the real change dynamic for me—meaning that parents understand the reforms occurring and understand how to support or change learning environments, not only for their students but for the broader context (community) in which they live. This might employ organizing, community development, public will building, message development, or parent training activities."[19] As Elev8 partners, parents traveled to Washington, D.C., to share their public policy priorities with federal lawmakers. Participating in this event helped parents feel empowered and allowed them the chance to create strong relationships with Elev8 staff. The relationship between parents and staff often serves as a crucial first step toward parents becoming involved in other Elev8 activities.[20] A parent of two students at one of the Elev8 schools in Oakland said, "The things I do at my daughter's school are from the heart, without any agenda. But thanks to Elev8 and the trip to D.C., I have been given a platform and a plan of how to get other parents involved."[21]

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7 Collaborative Staffing Models

To help strengthen and maintain partnerships, programs and schools often create staffing structures that intentionally blend roles across partners. This blended staffing allows partners to collaborate efficiently across settings and provides youth with consistent adult support spanning school and non-school hours. This arrangement also gives staff the chance to see how factors that arise during the school day may affect a child's interactions outside of school, and, conversely, how what happens at home with a child's family or in afterschool programs can affect the child during school. In Baltimore, for example, Elev8 afterschool learning coaches are present during the last hour of the school day, which creates a smooth transition from school to afterschool and allows staff and teachers the opportunity to communicate on a regular basis.

Having key staff with cross-cutting, or multiple, roles across different settings also greatly aids the integration of services, as this structure allows staff to understand how various services relate to one another and to identify opportunities to deepen connections across such elements. For Elev8, staff often have multiple and facilitating roles across the initiative, such as teachers who lead afterschool programs, or health care staff who teach school-day health classes. These cross-cutting roles help alleviate the tendency for school staff to view Elev8 staff and services as "afterthoughts," separate from the core culture and community of the school. In addition, teachers serving in Elev8 roles add value to the programs because of their deep knowledge of the youth, families, school curriculum, and communities involved.

This knowledge enables them to build on existing relationships to increase participation in Elev8, reducing the need to recruit new partners from the "outside."

Whether or not they have cross-cutting roles, however, school staff are often pivotal in communicating with other partners to help ensure continuity of care across services. Elev8 staff who are in close communication with school staff find those schools much more responsive and easier to work with than schools where they do not enjoy such close collaboration. One example of such a working relationship is at an Elev8 school in New Mexico, where the nurse practitioner, who is part of the Elev8 school-based health services, works alongside the school nurse, sitting next to her during school registration so that they can coordinate their efforts most effectively.[22] Likewise, community partners who have previous experience with school settings are better able to function in the school context and understand the school community and culture than partners who have not had such experience.

Lessons Learned

Creating meaningful linkages and collaborations across partners is crucial to implementing community schools and other models for learning that provide students with comprehensive supports. In the following table, we link the key elements of successful *partnerships for learning* discussed previously to steps that community service providers, schools, and families can take to develop such linkages in order to establish and sustain successful *partnerships for learning*.

Key Elements of Successful Partnerships for Learning	Steps to Implementing the Key Elements		
	Step 1: Planning	**Step 2: Implementation**	**Step 3: Ongoing**
Shared vision of learning	Be explicit about each partner's goals, roles, and responsibilities	Create a mutual understanding of the partnership's purpose and goals (e.g., through a Memorandum of Understanding)	Build staff capacity to link to and understand partner goals and ways that these relate to the overall vision of the partnership
Shared leadership and governance	Identify entities that are willing to collaborate as equal partners	Designate someone to oversee the partnership, to ensure efforts are coordinated and aligned	Give partners—including teachers and parents— leadership positions to enable them to have active roles in the process
Complementary partnerships	Build on existing relationships and organizational capacity	Build relationships at all levels, from leadership to support staff	Align partner services with one another (e.g., connecting afterschool activities with in-school learning)
Effective communication	Set the expectation across partners for regular and ongoing communication	Create systems for formal communication, such as meetings, and encourage an informal dialogue among partners	Maintain regular communication to best coordinate services
Regular and consistent sharing of information about youth progress	Identify what data will be helpful to partners (e.g., details on services offered to youth, youth's academic outcomes)	Implement shared data tracking systems to help improve coordination	Use data to inform work conducted by all partners, including making improvements to address youth's learning needs most effectively
Family engagement	Conduct a needs assessment of families and the local community	Develop services that address the needs of families and the local community	Maintain a visible presence with parents and members of the community at large
Collaborative staffing models	Engage staff to serve in multiple roles and settings	Allocate staff time and responsibilities to partnership efforts	Ensure clarity related to staff roles and responsibilities

The experiences of Elev8 and other community schools provide important insights into developing and maintaining *partnerships for learning* in order to improve outcomes for youth. Schools and community service providers around the country that wish to create new or stronger partnerships with families and other community members, or wish to establish their own community schools, should look to the successes, challenges, and lessons learned from Elev8, as well as other community school initiatives. Understanding the experiences of established community school initiatives like Elev8 can prove invaluable in these efforts.

Notes

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3. Ibid.

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14. Harvard Family Research Project, interview with Elev8 directors and evaluators, 2008.

15. Harvard Family Research Project, interview with Elev8 New Mexico director, May 2012.

16. www.ydinm.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=233:hammer-featured-in-evaluation-webinar

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19. Harvard Family Research Project, survey of Elev8 New Mexico director, August 2012.

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Appendix: Overview of the Elev8 Initiative

In 2006, The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) selected New Mexico, Chicago, Oakland, and Baltimore as locations to implement the Elev8 initiative at select local schools. Atlantic is an international philanthropic organization focused on supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. Elev8 provides youth with a solid foundation in academics, along with a combination of wide-ranging services focused on their overall physical and emotional well-being to ensure that they benefit from a supportive and holistic learning environment. At each of the four locations, four or five schools have implemented Elev8. These schools are located across the city in both Chicago and Oakland; within one specific neighborhood in Baltimore; and across the state in New Mexico. Although each school tailors the services to meet local needs, all Elev8 schools share a common set of features in terms of the purpose, target population, services provided, structure, principles guiding the work, and provision of a local evaluation. These elements are outlined below.

Purpose. At the heart of the Elev8 initiative is the belief that the integrated delivery of learning, health, and family support services, combined with family and community engagement, will make lasting changes in the lives of all children, particularly those from low-income communities of color. Atlantic believes that, if schools deliver these supports in a strategically coordinated way, youth will be prepared to succeed in school and life.

Target Population. Elev8 targets middle-school students to prepare them to thrive in high school and beyond. The populations served vary in their demographics, although all Elev8 schools serve high-need communities, most with high rates of poverty and crime, along with large minority populations.

Services. Each Elev8 school includes four core pillars of support: (1) Extended learning opportunities for youth through afterschool and summer learning programs; (2) School-based health care for youth and families; (3) Family and community support services that promote economic stability, wellness, and continuing education; and (4) Family and community engagement efforts to involve families in their children's learning.

Structure. All Elev8 locations began with a nonprofit organization acting as the lead agency responsible for implementing Elev8 in partnership with schools. These lead agencies (also called "conveners") identified schools and community partners to provide an integrated set of school-based services that encourage collaboration, communication, and connectedness at the school, community, and policy levels. Each school includes an Elev8 site director who works with the school administration, parents, community members, and Elev8 service providers to integrate unified supports for individual youth and their families. At the community level, within each Elev8 community, Elev8 lead agencies partner with other community-based organizations, families, community members, and school leaders to integrate Elev8 supports. At the policy level, Elev8 lead agencies and other community leaders work to generate government adoption of integrated supports that youth need in order to succeed in school and beyond. Leadership has shifted over time away from these lead agencies, with schools and other partners taking on greater responsibility.

Guiding Principles. The partners at each Elev8 school work collectively to:

• Make a commitment to social justice and equity;

• Bring together schools, families, and the community in underserved neighborhoods to ensure that children and youth succeed in school and in life;

• Build communities that value and support the success of children and youth;

• Support the belief that an approach that considers the whole child and their family will have the greatest impact;

• Ensure that, by the time students finish 8th grade, they are prepared for high school and will go on to graduate;

• Identify local problems and create solutions; and

• Engage children, youth, and families to become advocates for improving education and expanding access to critical resources in their community.

Evaluation and Policy Research. Each location works with a local evaluator to document Elev8's implementation successes and challenges. In addition, a national evaluator works across locations to collect, analyze, and use data focused on a common outcomes framework as well as to explore special topical research questions.* These evaluators have also begun to examine outcomes for youth and their families in order to help the local schools track their progress and support continuous improvement. In addition, the local evaluators are working with Atlantic to track a common set of indicators across schools to show the initiative's larger value and impact. These data will help inform a number of upcoming reports on the Elev8 initiative showing its impact on youth and families, including the following publications:

• Baltimore—Outcomes study on academic achievement and fact sheets;

• Chicago—A series of briefs on family supports, out-of-school time, health, and school engagement; and an outcomes study on the transition to high school among Elev8 graduates;

• New Mexico—Case studies and a family engagement brief; and

• Oakland—Outcomes study on academic achievement and an analysis of school impact data for OST students and AmeriCorps staff.

In addition, Elev8 research and policy partners are working to produce national policy and research reports to demonstrate Elev8's impact: Research for Action, an independent research group, will publish three "special topic briefs" and the Hatcher Group, a communications firm that works on progressive policy issues, will produce policy briefs summarizing lessons learned on school discipline, out-of-school time, and school-based health services.

For more information on Elev8, visit www.elev8kids.org.

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* Local evaluators currently include Chapin Hall for Elev8 Chicago, University of New Mexico for Elev8 New Mexico, and Carson Research Consulting for Elev8 Baltimore. LFA Group was the local evaluator for Elev8 Oakland through 2011. The national evaluator is Research for Action. Public/Private Ventures was the national evaluator through the 2011–2012 school year.

About Harvard Family Research Project

Since 1983, we have helped stakeholders develop and evaluate strategies to promote the wellbeing of children, youth, families, and communities. Our work focuses primarily on three areas that support children's learning and development—early childhood education, out-of-school time programming, and family and community support in education.

Building on our knowledge that schools alone cannot meet the learning needs of our children, we also focus national attention on complementary learning. Complementary learning is the idea that a systemic approach, which integrates school and nonschool supports, can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed. Underpinning all our work is our commitment to evaluation for strategic decision making, learning, and accountability.

Acknowledgments

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