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The New Hampshire Extended Learning Opportunities Evaluation

Executive Summary:
Final Report of Evaluation Findings

Final formative and summative feedback to inform the continuing implementation of Extended Learning Opportunities in New Hampshire

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Executive Summary

Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) are a central component of the NH Department of Education's (NH DOE) strategy to provide New Hampshire high school students with engaging and rigorous learning experiences not typically found in the traditional classroom. With support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF), NH DOE implemented a three-year ELO Initiative, which remains ongoing. The Initiative provided substantial financial support and technical assistance to four ELO pilot sites, facilitating development of school-level systems to provide students of all types with the opportunity to experience an ELO project. The pilot sites included Franklin, Laconia, Manchester Central, and Newfound Regional high schools.

Overall, NH DOE estimates 1,218 ELO projects were completed between January 1, 2009 and December 31, 2010. A large subset of these projects was examined by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute as one aspect of a comprehensive 18-month evaluation of the Initiative. In addition to analysis of the characteristics of ELO projects and student participants, the evaluation featured extensive engagement with the Initiative's leaders and technical assistance partners through interviews and events. Most importantly, it included substantive engagement through surveys and on-site interviews of participating district and school leaders, faculty, students, and community partners, including observation of ELOs in action.

In its prototypical form, an ELO project is developed in response to a specific student interest, and is a well-planned and robust educational experience occurring outside the traditional classroom with support from a community partner, and with facilitation and oversight from a qualified teacher. The project must reflect established curriculum standards, and required course competencies must be met for academic credit to be awarded. The evaluation found that many, though not all, ELOs meet these criteria, and that all four schools generated a significant volume of ELO projects that were widely embraced by a diverse array of participating students, teachers, and community partners. Overall, student, faculty, school administrator, and community partner sentiment suggests that ELOs provide value to students and should continue to be offered.

Following are selected evaluation findings resulting from exploration of the key research questions that guided the NH ELO Initiative evaluation. Findings reflect an intense focus on generating formative feedback to support the Initiative's ongoing refinement, as well as preliminary indicators of its sustainability and its impact on participating students, teachers, and schools.

ELO Development and Implementation

New Hampshire's ELO Initiative provided an opportunity to see what ELO implementation would look like at scale within four high schools that represent both the urban and rural character of the state's communities. Examination of the development and implementation of ELOs in these schools led to the following observations:

- √ Initially, ELO pilot schools lacked key infrastructure, tools, and experience required to implement high-quality ELOs. The ELO Initiative built a foundation for success through targeted support. Absent this support, ELOs may not be well implemented or successful.
- √ The ELO coordinator is central to ELO system development, implementation, and quality assurance. ELOs require new systems, community partnerships, training, and extensive facilitation. Lacking a designated coordinator, these tasks are unlikely to be accomplished.

- √ ELO activity demonstrates a tremendous emphasis on the use of ELOs for elective credit. Pursuit of core credit through an ELO appears to be a more complex undertaking. In fact, strategies to meet the requirements of core classes in academic subject areas through ELOs remain in a formative stage.
- √ Practice shows fluidity in the roles of ELO coordinator, community partner, and overseeing teacher. This often appears to facilitate implementation and allows schools to capitalize on limited resources. The flexibility to customize the role of adults in the ELO to the context of the individual project is essential, but appropriate only insofar as standards for a rigorous learning experience are met.
- √ Schools have adopted different models for ELO implementation, particularly in relation to the role and time afforded to teachers to support ELO implementation. These models reflect differing school-based resources and approaches to the use of teacher and student time. While no one model has proven most effective, those that integrate ELOs closely into teaching practice may have the most potential for sustainability.
- √ Internal and external constraints may complicate ELO implementation and should be carefully considered in the development of ELO implementation strategies. Specifically, the lack of foundation conditions required to implement ELOs, leadership discontinuity, and limited community partner options should be identified and accounted for in the implementation planning phase.

ELO Student Characteristics

The ELO Initiative came with a mandate that ELOs be accessible to students of all backgrounds, abilities, and academic histories. This included "underserved" youth, a group defined to include students with academic, discipline or attendance issues, students living in economically disadvantaged households, and students who are racial or ethnic minorities or for whom English is a second language. While service to this population was emphasized, the overall emphasis was on service to all students. Surveys, interviews, ELO observation, and analysis of 789 validated project records (the "ELO dataset") provide insight into student participation, leading to the following observations:

- √ The vision of ELOs as tools capable of engaging students of widely varying personal and academic characteristics appears to have been realized. Participants ranged from schools' highest-achieving students to students who were struggling academically, with many students who characterized themselves as average. Participants also included students with special needs and students with limited English proficiency.
- √ Over a third of ELO participants met one or more of the criteria for an underserved learner. Overall these students exhibited ELO completion rates similar to other participants; however, the students who are most at-risk were observed to require significant support to ensure ELO success. Underserved students were somewhat more likely to complete a group ELO than an individual ELO project.
- √ Student interests are the primary motivator for ELO development and participation, but ELOs also serve an important student support role and have been used to strengthen existing programs. Three typologies emerged:
  - √ Interest-driven ELOs – creative, highly personalized, beyond-the-classroom experiences.
  - √ Student-support-driven ELOs – flexible responses to students' academic *or social* support needs.
  - √ Integration-driven ELOs – bringing existing programming under the ELO tent.

ELO Project Characteristics

Definitions of the specific types of experiences that may be considered an ELO are purposefully broad. As a result, at the outset of the Initiative there was some uncertainty as to what forms ELOs would take (e.g., student internships, performing groups, online courses) when implemented at scale within the four pilot schools. Further, the evaluation sought to clarify the time and location of ELO activity, the types of credit students were awarded, and the participation of teachers and community partners. Interviews, surveys, and analysis of the ELO dataset lead to the following observations:

- √ ELOs can be used to address virtually any subject area. Although survey data highlight a high frequency of English/journalism ELOs, the prevalence of ELOs related to physical education/health, career technical education, and the arts serves to highlight the adaptability of those hands-on, product or performance-based subjects to ELOs. This is in contrast to mathematics, which was commonly described as more difficult to adapt to ELOs.

- √ ELOs allowed students to earn credit for non-traditional educational experiences, with most students receiving less than one full credit. Although primarily used to gain elective credit, many ELOs provided credit that students needed in order to graduate.

- √ Just over half of student ELO participants are engaged through a group project—an experience shared by one or more students. A resource-efficient vehicle for engaging students, particularly those engaged in student clubs or activities who desire a rigorous, credit-bearing experience, the proportion of students served through group ELOs rose substantially over the final two years of the grant.

- √ Most, but not all, ELOs offered students a departure from traditional courses in terms of both the location of learning and the schedule for learning and project completion. Nearly two-thirds occurred outside of school and the traditional classroom and three-fourths took place after school hours. These trends may be influenced greatly by local context, with more rural schools' ELOs less likely to demonstrate these characteristics.

- √ ELOs typically engage students, teachers, and community partners, but are viable even in school districts that lack a critical mass of local businesses and organizations to serve as community partners. Community partners represent a great range of institutions and individuals, serving in roles ranging from mentor, to provider of needed resources, to beneficiaries of a product or service.

ELO Assessment

Assessment policies and practices in many ways serve to define the student learning experience, establishing what content teachers must convey, what students must learn, and how learning will be measured. The ELO Initiative sought to shift established grading practice in relation to the assessment of ELOs. Its emphasis on assessing performance through measurement of four specific components of the learning experience—research, reflection, product and presentation—differs from traditional assessment practice. The Initiative sought to focus assessment squarely on determining what a student can demonstrate s/he knows and is able to do at the conclusion of the project, de-emphasizing inputs such as "seat time" and homework compliance. Interviews, surveys, ELO observation and review of project documentation lead to the following observations:

- √ ELO assessment was shown to differ substantively from traditional grading practice, emphasizing student reflection and demonstration of learning, with little reliance on traditional tests or attendance. The need to enhance assessment through additional teacher training and the development of reliable rubrics is an ongoing focus of NMEF and NH DOE support.

- √ The ELO Initiative leveraged the developing expertise of ELO technical assistance providers and ELO pilot school staff to develop common rubrics for assessment, which were piloted in the closing months of the grant. Concurrently, the state made progress in the development and implementation of a new Competency Validation Rubric.
- √ The ELO Initiative built new assessment capacity amongst both the pilot schools and technical assistance providers, helping to develop a process to support the development of competency-based assessment systems within schools.

ELO Quality and Rigor

ELO are an innovative approach to teaching and learning that may challenge traditional conceptions of how learning takes place. Positioned in this way, the Initiative was undertaken with an understanding that potentially skeptical local communities and educators would need to see evidence of the quality and rigor or ELOs. NH DOE deployed a cadre of technical assistance providers to facilitate the rapid development of quality ELOs in each of the pilot schools. The goal was to implement and rigorously assess student ELOs using valid and reliable competencies and assessment tools, which would frame the standards for ELO quality. Although development of those consistent, valid, and reliable assessments remains ongoing, a range of evaluation data led to the following observations:

- √ Student, teacher, and community partner survey results suggest that most ELOs are characterized by high expectations, rigor, and learning that is relevant to student goals. However, rigor was observed to vary widely, signaling a need to further define and maintain high standards for ELO quality and rigor.
- √ A wide majority of ELOs require students to engage in project-related reflection, product, and presentation—which constitute three of the four components NH DOE considers necessary for a quality ELO. Integration of the fourth component, topic research, appears to be rising, but remains less common. The value placed on these four components is reflected in the recently piloted ELO common assessment system.
- √ Group ELOs offer apparent resource efficiencies, leveraging the efforts of teachers and community partners in service to a greater number of students. They may also reinforce the success of underserved students by providing greater structure and peer support than is found in a typical individual student ELO. However, group ELOs are also somewhat less likely to include each of the four components of a quality ELO.

ELO Initiative Outcomes

While primarily focused on formative questions, the ELO evaluation also sought to ascertain the Initiative's effectiveness in generating benefits to participating students, teachers, and pilot schools. Given that the Initiative was being piloted during the course of the NMEF grant, and as such is in a relatively early phase of implementation, the evaluation focuses largely on short-term (immediate) outcomes. In the long-term, student-level impact analysis is highly recommended. Impacts were identified through an analysis of extensive survey and interview data, and offer very positive indications regarding the impact of ELOs, as follow:

Student Outcomes

- √ Most students believe that they learned more through their ELO project than they would have through a typical class in the same subject area. In addition, All-Faculty Web Survey results indicate that ELOs are widely perceived to have a positive impact on students' academic interest

- √ Results suggest positive effects, particularly in relation to students' awareness of skills they will need for the future, self-confidence, work readiness, and clarity about interests and goals. Students with moderate- and high-baseline ratings reported more positive outcomes than low-baseline students.
- √ ELOs were successful in imparting new knowledge and skills. Both students and teachers highlighted the relevance of real-world ELO experiences, as well as the new knowledge and transferable skills ELOs imparted to students.

Teacher and Community Partner Outcomes

- √ Teachers report positive outcomes stemming from their participation in ELOs, including more personalized relationships with students and improved ability to use competency-based assessment techniques.
- √ Community partners offer a positive view of ELOs and their effects on their organizations. ELOs led to mentoring relationships with students, and were rewarding, both personally and for their organization.

School-Level Outcomes

- √ Findings suggest that ELOs can bring rigor, as well as credit potential, to existing after-school clubs, established programs, and course offerings. This is the result of the clearer standards and expectations of quality that accompanied the ELO Initiative.
- √ ELOs expand schools' existing course offerings, and give new voice to teachers and students as they explore themes that extend beyond the traditional school curriculum. In this way, ELOs allow for small schools, in particular, to provide students with a greater diversity of learning opportunities.
- √ ELO implementation has catalyzed school action with regard to defining course competencies and competency-based assessment practices. In one school in particular, core aspects of ELOs are now being integrated at the classroom- and school-level.
- √ The ELO Initiative was successful in building credibility and establishing momentum for ELO adoption, both within the pilot and network schools, as well as regionally.

ELO Sustainability and Scale-up: Lessons Learned

Given the importance of sustainability and NH DOE's strategic decision to scale-up ELO implementation throughout the state, researchers first sought to confirm support among ELO pilot and network schools for continued implementation of ELOs, and then to identify crucial lessons learned for ongoing implementation at the pilot and network sites, and on the expansion of ELOs to other schools.

Based on extensive survey, interview, and observation data, it became evident that the desire to sustain ELOs exists and is relatively strong among all stakeholder groups. A vast majority of school faculty indicated that ELOs have value and that they should be continued at their respective schools. Students and community partners expressed a similar sentiment. School leaders and ELO coordinators from ELO pilot and network schools alike voiced their commitment to maintaining ELOs, and highlighted the value of ELOs in terms of specific observable school- and student-level outcomes. It is important to note however, that while school leaders and ELO coordinators were highly invested in ELOs, they also shared some concerns—to varying degrees—regarding their ability to sustain ELOs given the current economic challenges facing their respective districts.

Key lessons that offer perspective on factors that may influence sustainability and facilitate successful scale-up of ELOs throughout New Hampshire include:

- √ The role of the ELO coordinator as recruiter, facilitator, trainer, and champion is critical to the development and implementation of high quality ELOs.
- √ Schools need to create opportunities and structures that support teachers' ongoing work and collaboration with students as they perform their ELOs.
- √ Districts and schools can significantly enhance their prospects for a successful launch of ELOs if they establish conditions that serve as a foundation for their implementation. Such foundation conditions for ELO success might include: approved local district policies; validated course competencies; committed district and school leadership as well as a core of teachers willing to "pioneer" ELOs; an ELO coordinator who is well-networked and/or positioned to collaborate with school faculty and with community organizations; engagement with established NH DOE network resources; awareness of "best current practice models" for ELO planning, implementation, and assessment; and willingness to invest in teacher professional development.
- √ Acknowledging imbalances in the availability of community partner resources to rural districts, flexibility, external support, and continuing innovation may be required to ensure access to ELOs for these districts.
- √ New Hampshire's varied community profile and deeply rooted "home rule" tradition require flexibility in the implementation of ELOs. Flexibility serves a beneficial role, enabling innovation, provided that the core goals and rigor of ELO learning experiences are maintained.
- √ ELOs should not be viewed as an educational option tailored exclusively to underserved or high achieving students, but promoted as a learning opportunity intended to benefit *all* students.
- √ Support for ongoing documentation and tracking of ELO activity and characteristics should be maintained. This information, along with student-level outcomes research, would serve an important formative purpose and could also secure both political and financial support for continuation or expansion of ELOs as a route to credit in New Hampshire and beyond.