



Voyager Expanded Learning Helps School Districts Eliminate the Need for Social Promotion

Voyager Expanded Learning is a national education initiative that ensures all children reach high standards. Voyager is committed to making a dramatic impact on the lives of children and directly supporting the public schools they attend. Working with America's elementary and middle school students, Voyager serves as an early intervention system whose research-based curriculum is aligned with state and national standards and helps ensure appropriate academic promotion.

In conjunction with our partners, the Smithsonian Institution, NASA, and the Discovery Channel, Voyager Expanded Learning emphasizes building student interest through highly participatory, hands-on activities designed to nurture innate curiosity while focusing on skill development and enhancing critical thinking. Core subjects are transformed into exciting adventures. The curriculum is multidisciplinary, integrated, field-tested, and proven to produce significant academic growth.

Voyager Expanded Learning is in more than 1,000 school districts in 44 states, including 5,000 students in Washington, D.C., 19,000 students in New York City, 40,000 students in Houston, and 3,500 students in Milwaukee, among many other districts. School districts have chosen the Voyager curricula to ensure appropriate academic promotion as well as to ensure students accelerate or, at a minimum maintain, their academic standing. Voyager provides accountability for the school district through proven academic excellence as well as renowned teacher professional development.

The Smithsonian Institution/Voyager T. Rex curriculum is one component of the Washington D.C. Summer Stars program. The goal of this collaboration is to provide a rich learning experience to meet the unique needs of all students. In the T. Rex program, students develop skills as junior paleontologists as they go on an imaginary journey to the age of dinosaurs. Completing tasks such as reconstructing a dinosaur skeleton and developing their own theories on extinction, students will learn the concepts of time, extinction, adaptation, and food chains. Particularly exciting aspects of this adventure include receiving a daily fax from Dr. Michael K. Brett-Surman, a Smithsonian paleontologist on-site at a fictional dig, as well as journeying to the Smithsonian Institution for two guided tours through the Paleontology Hall at the Natural History Museum.

Voyager also offers other extended learning programs. Approximately half of the 19,000 students in New York City have enrolled in Voyager's reading program, which was selected, in part, because of the performance results from four Voyager school districts evaluated last summer. That evaluation showed that within 15 to 19 days of participation, 60% of students made significant gains. Student performance increased 82% in reading

comprehension, 96% in decoding and 27% in word recognition. Researchers assert that the data confirm that children of all backgrounds and abilities achieve significant reading gains through participation in the Voyager Reading Program.

A critical factor in the success of the Voyager program is that learning is both highly participatory and interactive. Based upon the idea that students learn best when they are actively engaged, Voyager presents intriguing subject matter in a creative and varied manner. In this way, Voyager challenges students to go beyond rote memorization and explore advanced topics and concepts. Similarly, by connecting learning in the classroom to real world experiences, Voyager helps stimulate students' innate curiosity and foster a lifelong love of learning.

In addition to its interest-based content, Voyager relies on unique pedagogical processes to promote a strong sense of personal responsibility and community respect. To facilitate collaborative learning, students are paired with "pathfinders" -- classmates who provide mutual support, teach the value of cooperation, and help one and another progress through the learning adventure. Through a process aimed at establishing "group tone," students determine the learning environment as well as establish the consequences of failing to meet these student-devised expectations.

Voyager staff development courses provide proven strategies and teaching methodologies that substantially enhance the effectiveness of every teacher. Research-based and tested practices, combined with the most current content from our partners, ensure a high-quality, high-impact two day training program. Ongoing staff development during the school year is supported through a weekly video and discussion series and online resources.

The Voyager experience confirms that children from diverse backgrounds and all socioeconomic levels can learn complex concepts beyond their grade level. Currently operating in school districts across the nation, Voyager helps eliminate the need for social promotion.

WHEN EXTENDED DAY IS NOT ENOUGH

1. National and State standards provide clarity about what every child has a right and a responsibility to know and be able to do.

In most states, assessment systems have been set up to measure student performance against those standards and to provide sanctions from social retention to withholding graduation for students failing to meet standards.

2. There is increasing evidence that any student, who is unsuccessful in achieving these standards, or in staying in school, will face uncompromising odds in the work force and in our economy.

In fact, in many cases, the public education system that fails these students as children will be replaced by the public welfare or penal system which will have to provide for them as young adults.

3. Even with stakes this high, we continue to lose students to failure. Even when we know how to turn these circumstances around, we have not. We know that American children can achieve high standards if they have effective, certified teachers, working with smaller class sizes, using research-based instructional programs, in schools that focus on students' needs.

4. We know time is the most strategic resource we have to extend more opportunities to students at risk. Historically, time has worked against these students. They have had less time with qualified, certified teachers, less time in course work linked to academic success, less time on task in poorly managed classes, and less time in school as inevitably their attendance lags and finally they drop out. These same students often have more time unmonitored and unsupervised, and exposed to risk and danger.

5. There are a number of programs and organizations that aim to extend quality time for children and adolescents. Many of them provide custodial care for students after school and in summer, involving them in group activities, games, sports, and more. Community programs and community organizations have been providing these services for decades. They are a part of the local landscape, as has been their funding.

6. What is new is the unprecedented availability of funds (federal, state and business) to these agencies for extended day activities. However, these funds are driven by the growing belief that we must do more for children at risk, and that we must use the extended day and summer to target and prevent failure, and to accelerate learning and success.
7. While custodial programs that keep children safe, supervised, active, and involved have had an important role to play in communities, they are not enough for the students we are losing. They do not provide support for students who need to meet academic standards. These programs do not address such standards; in fact, they choose to be and presently are allowed to be judged by other criteria.
8. Voyager is a program that aims to improve learning for all children, but particularly those at risk. Each of its "adventures" is designed to motivate, to improve the capacity of a student to learn, to invite them to grapple with content and issues worthy of reflection and to teach them to collaborate and lead. Further, every program explicitly targets national and state standards critical to a student's success.
9. Every federal, state, and private-sector dollar spent on extended day and summer programs that do not deliver the kind of help Voyager provides in advancing a student's shot at graduation, higher-Ed, and competitive employment is a dollar spent but not invested – well intentioned, perhaps, but misdirected. **Extended day and summer programming will not be enough to reverse student failure unless it is directly and effectively targeted at learning standards that yield improved opportunity for American students.**
10. There is growing evidence that summer and after school programs that are taught by qualified and certified teachers, in smaller groups, using worthwhile content and tested approaches, can quite dramatically accelerate achievement, motivation, and self esteem. At Voyager, we have seen such evidence. We should be investing in programs like Voyager that are designed to use extended day and summer as added hours of investment in helping students reach high standards academically, educationally, economically, and personally. Anything less than Voyager is not nearly enough.

ENDING SOCIAL PROMOTION THROUGH ACADEMICALLY RICH EXTENDED LEARNING PROGRAMS

PREMISE:

- Ending social promotion is a top Administration Priority.
- Extended Learning Programs are a key component of the Administration's strategy to end social promotion.
- 21st Century Learning is the primary funding source for extended learning, but as currently written, it lacks the academic focus necessary to address social promotion effectively.
- **Consequently, 21st Century Community Learning Centers Policy Guidelines should be rewritten with a more rigorous academic focus.**

Ending the practice of social promotion has been identified by the White House and the U.S. Department of Education as a top education priority.

“That is why I have repeatedly challenged states and school districts to end social promotion—to require students to meet rigorous academic standards at key transition points in their schooling, and to end the practice of promoting students without regard to how much they have learned. As every parent knows, students must earn promotion through effort and achievement, not simply by accumulating time in school.” (President Clinton, Memorandum to the Secretary of Education, February 1998).

“Social promotion is an unacceptable response to the concern we all feel about the problem of low achievement in our nation's schools. The U.S. Department of Education is committed to helping end social promotion by working with states, districts, and schools to devise effective alternatives. Truly embracing the idea that all children can learn—and making sure that all children do—requires that we all take responsibility for ending social promotion and help all students meet high expectations for learning.” (Secretary Richard Riley, U.S. Department of Education, “Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion,”)

A key component in the Administration's plan to end social promotion is increased opportunities for extended learning.

"Along with ending the practice of ending social promotion we must provide extra help for children after school and in the summer so that we don't just identify children as failures, but instead say, 'We're going to give you more help until you succeed.'" (President Clinton, July 1998).

"By intervening early in a child's school career and targeting those students who need intensive and tailored assistance, extended learning programs can help prepare students academically and developmentally to move to the next grade." (U.S. Department of Education, "Taking Responsibility," 47)

Strategies for Ending Social Promotion

(U.S. Department of Education, "Taking Responsibility," 10)

- Set clear objectives for students to meet performance standards at key grades.
- Identify student needs early in order to apply appropriate instructional strategies.
- Focus on providing high-quality curriculum and instruction.
- Provide professional development that deepens teacher's content knowledge and improves instructional strategies to engage all children in learning.
- **Provide summer school for students who are not meeting high academic standards.**
- **Extended learning time through before-and after-school programs, tutoring, homework centers, and year-round schooling**

"After-School programs not only keep children safe and out of trouble, but they also provide a prime opportunity to increase learning. Young people attending formal after-school programs spend more time in academic activities and in enrichment lessons than do their peers left unsupervised after school. Students in after-school programs show better achievement in math, reading and other subject." (U.S. Department of Education "Safe and Smart: Making After-School Hours Work for Kids," 13)

The primary source of federal funds specifically targeted for extended learning is 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

Although other federal programs such as Title I, Gear Up, and the Reading Excellence Act provide funds that can be used for extended learning, 21st Century Community Learning is the only program explicitly designed for the creation of after-school and summer school opportunities.

Of the above federal initiatives, 21st Century Community Learning Centers offers one approach which policymakers support to ending social promotion— adding additional learning time to the end of the school day.

Analysis of 21st Century Learning Centers Application

Of the thirteen listed Program Activities, of which four are required for funding, only three provide the academic focus necessary to help children reach high standards.

Although Competitive Priority 1 directly addresses the need for academic-based extended learning, it is worth only five points out of a total of 105 for the full application.

Of the remaining selection criteria: Competitive Priority 2, Need for Project, Quality of Project Design, Adequacy of Resources, Quality of the Management Plan, and Quality of Project Evaluation, none require that grants are specifically targeted for academically rich extended learning programs.

Importance of Academic Focus

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Every federal, state, local, and private-sector dollar spent on extended day and summer programs that do not deliver the kind of academic help necessary to advance a student's chance at graduation, higher education, and competitive employment is a dollar spent but not invested – well intentioned, perhaps, but misdirected. **Extended day and summer programming will not be enough to reverse student failure unless it is directly and effectively targeted at learning standards that yield improved opportunity for American students.**