

Testimony before the Education Reform Commission, August 8, 2012

Shelley Lester, Enrichment Coordinator, Spencer-Van Etten Central School District

Steering Committee Member of the Expanded Learning Network of the Southern Tier (ELNoST), a regional chapter of New York State After-school Network (NYSAN)

Good Afternoon, my name is Shelley Lester. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in today's important panel discussion and I thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

The Spencer-Van Etten Central School District has been a recipient of two Twenty First Century Community Learning Centers Grants. We were funded in Round One and are currently funded in Round Four as part of B.A.S.E. Camp One which funds four school districts, Bradford, Odessa – Montour, Spencer –Van Etten, and Watkins Glen. These schools districts work together in a partnership to provide high quality expanded learning programming with the goal of increasing student achievement, parent involvement, and increasing students' exposure and preparedness for college and career.

My testimony today will highlight our expanded learning programs' progress toward the Commission's objectives of :

- **Improving Student Achievement**
- **College and Career Readiness**
- **Access to high quality educational programs**
- **Parental engagement**

As the process of education reform goes forward in New York State, consideration of the importance of expanded learning programs and their contribution to student achievement is a must.

Expanded learning programs provide solid support for students in the areas of academic achievement and socio-emotional development. In ten years of expanding learning programs in our school district students have been exposed to programs that have enhanced their self- confidence and exposed them to possibilities for their future that they may never have known existed otherwise. Our programs operate for three hours each day during the school year, providing daily academic support. Our summer program consists of five weeks with a minimum of six programming hours a day. Summer programming is designed to immerse students in educational opportunities such as: career academies, character education, and STEM programming.

Expanded learning programs in our district have provided a solid foundation of academic and socio-emotional support for students including:

- **Building solid relationships with school district faculty, students from other grade levels, including high school and college students who role model positive student behaviors. We also have fostered positive relationships with other students from our partnering school districts through planned joint activities.**

- Providing high quality enrichment programming that compliments school-day curriculum, such as: Robotics, Wild Wetlands (environmental science), full length dramatic productions, “Garden Gourmets” (a culinary arts program with a history focus). These programs contributed to increased ELA Grades from Fall to Spring for the 2010 – 2011 school year with 43.94 % of our students improving their ELA Grades by at least one full letter grade, compared to the state average of 39.43%.
- Exposing students to college through campus visits, college workshops, and an adapted application process in the middle school years.
- Introducing students to various future career opportunities through visits to local businesses, guest speakers, career workshops, and panels.
- Expanding and enhancing students’ access to education throughout the summer months through high quality educational summer programming.
- Engaging families through a successful family engagement program that offers several family literacy events throughout the year as well as culminating events celebrating project –based student work.
- Creating opportunities for parents to become involved such as: Parent Teacher Organization’s, volunteering in the classroom, workshops offered for parents and students to take together, such as water/boat safety lessons, first aid and CPR, etc.

The success of our expanding learning programs can be measured in a number of ways:

- As I mentioned above our core of strong enrichment activities contributed to increased ELA Grades from Fall to Spring for the 2010-2011 school year with 43.94% of our students improving their ELA grades by at least one full letter, compared to the state average of 39.43%
- In teacher surveys for the 2010-2011 academic year, teachers reported that 74% of regular attendees improved their academic performance and 62% of our regular attendees improved their class room behavior, while 69% improved in completing homework to satisfactory standards.
- Engaged parents expressing strong support for our program. One parent stated *“Please make sure this program continues and grows, as I am sure I’m not the only parent who has appreciated this opportunity so much. I’m so grateful for my daughter being in a safe place, and making our lives so much richer!”* Yet another parent shared these sentiments *“Thank you for bringing these great opportunities to our students! My daughter has grown leaps and bounds through your program and the positive influence of your staff. She has come out of her shell in a very wonderful way. She is becoming stronger and more confident in many ways including relationships with her peers, class room assignments and general everyday life situations. I feel that being a part of the P.A.V.E. program (Parents, Afterschool, Volunteers, and Enrichment) is helping her through the difficult middle school pre-teen years.”*

In a decade of coordinating programs for students I have witnessed many success stories in which the goals and outcomes were met and program expectations were exceeded. These stories are not always tracked by numerical data, but they are none the less real for the students and families living them.

As I will discuss further below, our community partners and our school districts work very closely together to create our expanded learning program. Through this program, we provide academic enrichment, college and career readiness, and family engagement opportunities for our students and families that our districts alone could not.

Recommendations to consider

Create close school and community partnerships.

My school district could be considered a model for positive change in the alignment of school day and expanded learning programs. Spencer –Van Etten Central School District restructured its budget to provide expanded learning programming during the gap years between our Twenty First Century Community Learning Center Round One grant and our Round Four grant.

Funding was committed to allow for intentional project- based learning programs, as well as homework and academic assistance for both the elementary and middle schools, because the district recognized that these opportunities were too valuable for their students to lose.

With the award of the round four Twenty First Century Community Learning Centers Grant, the school district chose to employ an Enrichment Coordinator as well as a Family Engagement Coordinator, rather than have these positions filled by a community-based partner in a more traditional grant-based format. This structure ensures “ownership,” if you will, by the district. Expanded learning programs are not seen as an outside program by administration, faculty, and staff. This sense of ownership promotes a holistic approach to programming and helps to further the success of aligning expanded learning with school-day curriculum and the common core standards; this is evidenced by the results of Spencer-Van Etten’s performance as previously referenced.

In these times of budget gaps and decreased federal and state aid, it is extremely important to look at solid programs that have achieved goals of improved student achievement and keep them funded so that all students regardless of geographic location have a chance to benefit. New York should also look to incorporate solid expanded learning practices in its recommendations for how New York can support districts struggling to achieve college and career readiness for their students. Our experience has shown that expanded learning programs are a key part of our progress toward the goal.

Respond to rural needs.

The distribution of grant funding and financial allocations should be reviewed to take into account the difficult challenges faced by New York State’s rural students, such as geographic isolation, complex issues related to transportation and the lack of easily accessible cultural opportunities. The isolation of our rural students can be a tremendous barrier to college and career readiness, as they may lack familiarity with the many options that other might take for granted. Transportation is an ongoing challenge, and one that can further students’ isolation if they cannot find a way to attend the programs that we, and other programs like ours, have made available to provide enrichment activities.

Rural areas sometimes have different costs to meet our students' needs, and they sometimes have different needs from their urban and suburban counterparts. Developing a sufficient network of school and community partners with a wide variety of enrichment activities to offer can be a challenge as well especially as district budgets have grown tighter and tighter. New York State should develop a sustainable funding mechanism for expanded learning programs in rural areas of the state that recognizes these particular challenges and the key role of expanded learning programs in meeting the needs of rural students.

I am grateful that the Governor has committed to reforming our state's education system and replacing out dated practices with those that are needed by the students who will learn grow and eventually become the productive citizens and leaders of the twenty-first century. Continuing to integrate expanded learning programs with the traditional school day format will benefit all our students in need of twenty-first century skills to succeed in a twenty-first century world.