Middle School Matters Field Guide:
Research-Based Principles, Practices, and Tools

Chapter 2: Student Supports That Enhance Learning
Extended Learning Time (ELT)

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Extended Learning Time (ELT)

Middle grades schools can provide students with opportunities to learn outside the school day. The best opportunities should be integrated with the regular school day by connecting with the academic program students already participate in.[1, 2, 3, 4] School staff should align any program with what is going on in the school. This might include aligning with important deadlines (e.g., student project due dates) or extending other key academic activities. To ensure participation in extended learning time, programs should be geared toward meeting the needs of students and making sure that both parents and the community are aware of the programs. What follows are five research- and evidence-based principles to ensure the success of extended learning programs.

Principle 1:

Align the Extended Learning Time (ELT) program academically with the school day.

To improve academic performance, Extended Learning Time (ELT) programs need to align with what students experience during the school day. The ELT program coordinator should communicate regularly with school staff and can work with a designated coordinator from the school to ensure frequent communication takes place. Cooperation between programs and the school helps ELT programs evaluate student needs and provide more effective instruction and services.[1, 2, 3, 4]

Practice 1: *Use ELT program coordinators to develop relationships and maintain ongoing communication between schools and the ELT program about student academic performance and personal and social issues.*

The ELT coordinator has a critical role to ensure instructional components of the ELT program are aligned with the school day. Coordinators need to obtain information from school staff to guide instruction in the ELT program, through communication with key school staff and/or participation in school meetings and committees. The following are a few ways that coordinators can maintain communication with a school:

• Attend school staff meetings

• Participate in common planning periods

• Serve on school leadership teams

• Participate in parent-teacher organizations

When possible, the ELT coordinator should be housed within the school and be present during daily school hours. By being more visible to students and teachers, the ELT coordinator can create more opportunities to communicate with teachers, principals, and counselors,[5] build stronger relationships, and better understand the needs of students.

Practice 2: *Designate a school staff person to coordinate communication with ELT programs.*

Schools should designate a staff member as the school's coordinator to work with the ELT coordinator or with coordinators from multiple ELT programs, if relevant. The school coordinator should be the first point of contact for ELT programs and should ensure that ELT instruction is aligned with school goals.

Practice 3: *Connect ELT instruction to school instruction by identifying school goals and learning objectives.*

Information from the school and district is the basis for prioritizing ELT activities being designed to raise academic achievement. ELT programs can help students develop skills that support classroom instruction, such as learning how to plan, take notes, develop an outline, or study for an upcoming test. When promoting the use of skills from ELT during the school day, instructors should coordinate with classroom teachers to ensure the relevant skill aligns with classroom instruction and does not disrupt classroom routines.[2] Field trips or cultural activities that are part of the ELT program should connect to something the students are learning in school to help them see how what they learn in school relates to their real-life experiences.

Practice 4: *Coordinate with the school to identify staff for ELT programs.*

ELT programs have several roles for which effective classroom teachers are well suited. Teachers can serve as ELT coordinators, particularly during summer programs when they might not face conflicting demands on their time from regular teaching schedules. When funding is available to hire effective teachers from the school to serve as ELT instructors, these teachers can use their experience and knowledge of instructional methods to maximize academic gains for participating students.

PRINCIPLE 1 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Collaborating to Make the Most of ELT

Schools with ELT should set aside three weekly meetings of about 45 minutes each (up to two hours per week) for teachers to coordinate regular- and extended-day activities. Administrators should attend each meeting and identify common themes and hurdles to help make the most of ELT programs.

Grade/subject meetings: For these meetings led by department heads, all teachers in a grade and subject (such as seventh-grade English language arts teachers) meet to review specific curricular objectives and approaches for tackling them. Material to be covered in regular- and extended-day lessons is reviewed.

Cluster meetings: Facilitated by one teacher, these meetings are attended by teachers responsible for clusters, including subject area teachers of mathematics, ELA, science, and social studies. The cluster groups of teachers discuss individual student progress, curricular issues, and opportunities for cross-curricular collaboration. Material to be covered in the regular- and extended-day lessons is reviewed. Teachers who facilitate the cluster groups may or may not be rotated to allow other teachers the opportunity to participate.

School improvement planning: At these meetings, all teachers in the school review the school's improvement plan and progress toward its objectives. The school administrator chairing the meeting reviews various indicator data and identifies milestones and a plan for reaching them. How the extended day program is supporting school improvement should be reviewed at every school improvement meeting.

Principle 2:

Maximize student participation and attendance.

ELT programs should determine which factors are preventing students from participating and work with schools and parents to address the factors. Parents are critical to participation because they have a strong say in which programs they believe are beneficial to their child, and children generally value their parents' judgment.[6] Important factors parents take into account when deciding whether their child can participate in an ELT program include location, transportation, timing, length, program offerings, and frequency of services.[6]

Practice 1: *Design program features to meet the needs and preferences of students and parents.*

The ELT program should gather information from parents through a survey and talk with school staff to identify the needs of students and parents, and responses should guide how the program organizes and provides its services. One priority of ELT programs should be to work with schools and districts to ensure design features make the program accessible.[2, 7, 8, 9] For example, parents often prefer the use of school facilities for services, which eliminates the need to transport students to another location after school,[10] an option that is often not practical for working parents. If the program is not located at the school, or if the program is serving students from multiple schools, schools and districts should ensure that transportation to and from the program is readily available and affordable (or provided at no cost), and that adult supervision is provided while students are being transported.

Practice 2: *Promote awareness of the ELT program within schools and to parents.*

ELT programs should regularly inform parents, teachers, and other school staff about program activities and outcomes. Programs can use websites, flyers distributed at parent meetings, notices on school bulletin boards or in school newsletters, email (if appropriate), social media, and word-of-mouth to provide program location, hours of operation, and contact numbers. The information may need to be available in multiple languages.

Schools can work with ELT providers to promote participation. Teachers and administrators can identify and recruit students who might benefit from participating in the ELT program even one or two days a week. Teachers can provide referrals or informational materials to parents, or give the program a list of students they believe need academic assistance.[2, 11, 12, 13] Teachers or school administrators can also remind students at the end of the school day about attending the after-school program.

Practice 3: *Use attendance data to identify students facing difficulties in attending the program.*

Program coordinators should systematically collect ELT program attendance data and use it to identify students with low attendance. ELT staff can follow up with school staff to see if the attendance problem extends to the school day. ELT staff could also coordinate with school staff to contact parents and determine the reason for the absences.[5, 7, 14] Programs can consider using reward incentives, positive reinforcement, or special privileges to encourage regular attendance.

Principle 3:

Adapt instruction to individual and small group needs.

ELT is an opportunity to supplement learning from the school day and assist students whose needs extend beyond the instruction they receive in the classroom. Since ELT programs are shorter than the school day, instruction must be focused and targeted. Determining the most appropriate skills to teach and the right level of difficulty and pace is critical to effectively individualize instruction while making it challenging in practice.[15, 16] To provide targeted help, instructors first need to assess and document students' academic progress. The assessment can then be used to provide students with instruction that accommodates their level of development and rate of learning.[15,16]

Practice 1: *Use formal and informal assessment to inform academic instruction.*

ELT programs can use assessments administered during the school day—combined with input from classroom teachers—to individualize instruction. General assessments can measure a student's content knowledge and mastery of a topic and point to skills that should be emphasized during instruction. The information from assessments should be used to adapt the content, pace, and approach in ELT instruction.[1, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21] If additional information about student progress is needed, ELT instructors should incorporate formal and informal assessments into tutoring and homework assistance time.[7, 14, 20, 22]

Practice 2: *Break students into small groups and use one-on-one tutoring if possible.*

Ideally, ELT programs should use one-on-one tutoring to provide academic instruction to students.[12, 13, 17, 18, 23, 24] A one-to-one ratio enables the most attention for students and facilitates the continuous assessment of student progress and academic needs.[15]

If resources are limited and do not allow for one-on-one tutoring, three to nine students can be grouped,[2, 10, 14] especially when there will be opportunities for students to work independently.[15, 16, 24]

Practice 3: *Provide professional development and ongoing instructional support to ELT instructors.*

In order for ELT instructors to adapt instruction to meet the individual needs of their students, all ELT teachers should participate in a professional development and support program. Schools and districts may have high-quality training and professional development resources, and it may be to the school's benefit to be involved in the training of ELT instructors, many of whom may be classroom teachers or paraprofessional staff. Schools should provide professional development and discuss training options with the ELT program coordinator. Schools should also consider involving ELT program instructors in training and professional development courses at the school and district levels.

EXAMPLE PROGRAM: Enhanced Mathematics Instruction in an After-School Program[14]

Using out-of-school time to focus on middle school mathematics instruction has been shown to improve mathematics scores on standardized tests. A study looked at enhanced mathematics instruction using Harcourt School Publisher's *Mathletics* program, which was built around five mathematical themes, or strands: (1) numbers and operations, (2) measurement, (3) geometry, (4) algebra and functions, and (5) data analysis and probability. The program is designed to teach skills that should have been learned in prior school years but were not mastered by students.

Teachers in the after-school program used a planning guide to diagnose each student's performance on the pretests and determine which program activities were appropriate. Students charted their daily progress with a "My Math Fitness Plan" chart, which listed assignments and their completion.

Based on the pretests, students were grouped by grade, with separate materials for grades 2 through 5. Lessons averaged about three hours a week, either in four, 45-minute lessons or in three, 60-minute lessons. Periods were modeled after a gym exercise session, with a short warm-up problem for all students, two, 15-minute workout rotations focused on individual skill-building, and a final whole group cool-down activity related to the warm-up activity.

After the initial warm-up exercise with the teacher, students broke into groups or worked individually during the workout section of the class, with two, 15-minute rotations. The teacher worked with the groups to go over solutions and develop math skills. While teachers worked with groups, other students worked on their own to complete skill packs or computer math activities; some students worked in pairs on math games as well.

Over the course of a week, the teacher tried to meet with each student at least twice, with the goal of having students complete work on at least one or two skill packs per week.

More information about this example of an after-school program can be found at
http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pdf/20084021.pdf

Principle 4:

Provide engaging learning experiences.

ELT programs typically are voluntary and must compete with other activities to attract students; therefore, instruction must be engaging to overcome fatigue and distractions. ELT activities should be interactive, hands-on, learner-directed and related to the real world while remaining grounded in academic learning goals.[1, 8, 25] Fortunately, ELT programs have the flexibility to provide engaging opportunities for student learning.

Practice 1: *Make learning relevant by incorporating practical examples and connecting instruction to student interests and experiences.*

The ELT program should use tools or materials to which students can relate. ELT staff should identify the academic concept being taught and then find practical examples and relevant material to support that learning objective. When possible, programs should consider integrating academic content using an overarching program theme or final project to reinforce different learning activities and make learning more meaningful.[5, 8, 9, 19, 26]

Practice 2: *Make learning active through collaborative learning and hands-on academic activities.*

ELT instruction should encourage students to think actively about and interact with academic content. ELT programs can encourage interaction between peers by pairing struggling students with more advanced partners to help grasp difficult concepts.[27] ELT instructors can break students into groups to work together to solve a problem or to rotate through learning stations, although effective group exercises can be less formal and as simple as having a group of three students complete a mathematics problem together.[28, 29] ELT programs can use role-playing activities to make experiences real and meaningful for

students.[30, 31] Hands-on activities can also be helpful in reinforcing academic content.[32]

Practice 3: *Build adult-student relationships among ELT program participants.*

Positive and supportive relationships with adults can help students feel connected to the ELT program and invested in its academic material.[7, 11, 22, 26, 27, 33] ELT programs can help build adult-student relationships through activities such as field trips, and the programs can help engage students by personalizing activities to fit their interests. As instructors get to know their students, they can pinpoint students' interests, relate academic content to their context and interests, and encourage them to have high expectations.[22] To be most effective, ELT programs need to hire staff with backgrounds and interests that complement those of their students.[5, 25] ELT programs can then use relationship-building activities to help staff get to know students and become invested in their outcomes.[11, 22]

Principle 5:

Assess program performance and use the results for program improvement.

In implementing the ELT program, organizers should use *formative* evaluations to assess how a program has progressed and which program aspects are working well and *summative* evaluations to assess how effective a program has been in achieving its goals, which usually will include improving student academic outcomes. Both types of evaluations are instrumental in program improvement efforts and should be used in tandem.

ELT providers should put internal mechanisms in place to monitor staff performance and collect data related to program implementation. Schools or districts should then be responsible for evaluating program impacts on students. Evaluation findings can be used to identify problems and develop potential solutions, evaluate conditions under which the program is most effective, or make comparisons with the performance of other programs. These findings can be especially valuable in making long-term decisions about which strategies and programs should be continued or replicated in other areas.

Practice 1: *Develop an evaluation plan for ELT programs.*

An evaluation plan should include evaluation objectives and research questions, as well as details for data collection and analysis processes. The plan should contain information about the outcomes that will be used in the evaluation, the data that will be collected to measure those outcomes, and how data will be gathered. The plan should also outline the timeline for carrying out various components and describe how results will be disseminated and used.

Practice 2: *Collect program and student performance data.*

Program implementation data, student outcome data, and feedback from other stakeholders regarding satisfaction with the program should be gathered.[23] Program activity should be monitored as closely as possible, since the more detail available about implementation, the easier it will be to identify specific areas for improvement. The school ELT coordinator should have a lead role in program monitoring.

Practice 3: *Analyze the data and use findings for program improvement.*

Schools should analyze the data on implementation, student outcomes, and satisfaction, and use findings to improve the program. Schools should look for inconsistencies between what ELT providers proposed to do, how the program has actually been implemented, and identify patterns in the data that suggest problems areas, such as irregular attendance on certain days of the week. Districts can then use a larger data set to look for patterns across schools or across ELT providers. Schools should share their evaluation results with the ELT program to encourage growth and improvement, and then work collaboratively with the program to develop strategies that address areas of concern.

PRINCIPLE 5 EXAMPLE APPLICATION: Using Data for After-School Program Improvement—The Providence After School Alliance Initiative[34]

The Providence After School Alliance, a citywide consortium that began in 2004, emphasizes continuous improvement using both performance and evaluation data.

To set up its performance data, the Alliance reviewed established quality standards from other cities and adapted them to meet their needs. The Alliance then used quality measures to develop indicators and assessment tools, and installed an information system to collect and analyze the data. The system manages data on enrollment, participant background and demographics, attendance, retention, and programming schedules. The system's reporting feature supports analysis by individual programs, groups of programs, and providers, and allows the Alliance to track students with different patterns of participation and attendance. The system is also used to manage logistics, transportation, and program attendance.

The data were also linked with the school district's data, and the Alliance worked with a consultant to identify patterns and correlations in the two databases, such as links between after-school program attendance and school outcomes. Alliance managers use reports to regularly share participation numbers with the board of directors, the city council, funders, and other interested parties.

The Alliance also contracted for a three-year evaluation of its outcomes on young people with two main components: an implementation study that included an evaluation of the Alliance's quality strategy, and an outcome evaluation that follows a cohort of sixth graders, looking at grades, test scores, and attendance. The outcome evaluation includes a survey of participants and nonparticipants, and focuses on social and emotional competencies.

More information about this example of an after-school initiative (and four others) can be found at
http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR882.html

Conclusion

As with dropout prevention, the practices and principles for ELT rely on the recent IES practice guide,[35] adapted for this field guide for a middle grades context. After-school and extended-day programs have emerged relatively recently (the federal effort to support after-school programs only began in 1998 and the first evaluation of that program ended in 2005). Research in these areas is, therefore, limited and has considerable gaps. The IES practice guide synthesized research from various strands related to after-school and extended-day programs, but significant questions remain. Some concerns include how program exposure (sometimes called "dosage") relates to effectiveness, whether there is comparative effectiveness of different delivery models, and whether there is a tradeoff between using after-school time to develop academic skills versus other skills or proficiencies, such as music, art, dance, and cultural understanding. It has been suggested that developing other competencies contributes to stronger school engagement, but the topic is currently being explored; likewise, the highly varied landscape of after-school providers, contexts, and program designs suggests that caution is appropriate for any general statement about programs.

The broad literature review undertaken for the IES practice guide has the advantage of thoroughness and objectivity; the latter aspect in particular is often lacking in the charged policy environment of after-school programs. Practices not included here are likely to have a weaker evidence base.

The IES Practice Guide can be found at:
http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/ost_pg_072109.pdf

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