

Extended Learning Opportunities Innovation Implementation Guide



Background and Purpose

This document is intended for school leaders, teachers, and others interested in developing and implementing an innovative Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) program for their local context. It summarizes lessons learned from five pilots implementing ELO models in Maine.¹ Each of these ELO pilots was responsive to the school's specific needs, but they shared some common characteristics, including:

- Student-Driven Learning ELO students can earn credit through independent study projects or community-based internships, and they participate in designing new courses and infrastructure at their schools that will help them to establish core academic competencies.
- Inclusivity ELO programs are flexible and accommodate students regardless of their learning abilities, career aspirations, and access to transportation.
- Place-Based Interdisciplinary Learning New curricula provide students with opportunities to develop practical job and life skills out in the community while also learning about the local history, culture, and economy through experiential learning at school.
- Community Connections Expanded opportunities for field work, service learning, and internships are designed to build long lasting connections between students and the community.
- Leveraging Natural Resources Students gain hands-on opportunities to develop practical job and life skills by learning about and using existing resources around them.

Real-World Relevance - ELO students



Students from regional school unit (RSU) 71 (Belfast) Area High School on a boat preparing to harvest kelp.

learn about careers tied to the local economy and develop relevant job skills and community connections. Traditional academic concepts are applied to a real-world context as students explore sustainable solutions for addressing local challenges.

¹ These pilots were supported by the Maine Department of Education's Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program, which was funded by a \$17 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Rethink K–12 Education program.



Key Takeaways from Multiple Pathways Pilots

The tips below are intended to give school leaders ideas to consider when developing an ELO program for their own school. These key takeaways are based on an external evaluation of the ELO pilots supported by the Maine Department of Education's Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program, and can be adapted based on the local needs, opportunities, policies, and cultures of individual schools.

- **1** Demonstrated administrator buy-in helps to ensure the success of the core team in planning and implementing the program. High-level leadership support is critical for enabling curriculum or policy changes, bringing together educators or other staff who do not typically work together, and helping to foster a culture shift. For the ELO pilots, having a principal or assistant principal actively participate in drafting the proposal and carrying out planning activities helped build credibility and ensure a realistic design. These administrators encouraged teachers to envision nontraditional approaches to education, enabled course credits for new learning pathways, and publicly advocated for the new innovative model during teacher in-service days, school board meetings, and interactions with community businesses and organizations.
- 2 An effective core program team typically includes one or more academic content teachers, a community liaison, and a student advisor.
 - a. Academic content teachers are best positioned to serve as program "champions." The ELO champion role embodies a commitment to doing things differently, including integrating place-based learning into core academic subjects and complementing classroom opportunities with community-based connections and placements. Champions shepherd the change process within a school to adapt curriculum and policies, foster the buy-in of leadership and other educators for alternative learning pathways, and cultivate excitement among students and the broader school community. The right teachers for this role will depend on the envisioned curriculum to ensure that the experiential learning happening at school builds students' mastery of core academic content areas. For example, regional school unit (RSU) 44 Telstar High School's new interdisciplinary Local Ecology and Aspirations Pathway (LEAP) requires the ongoing collaboration between a science teacher and history teacher.
 - b. The community liaison cultivates and maintains partnerships with businesses, nonprofits, and public agencies in the community. Each ELO pilot shaped this position differently, but all had a dedicated full- or part-time position separate from the academic teaching faculty with formal responsibilities for developing partnerships and coordinating community-based learning.
 - c. At least one member of the core team serves as a designated student advisor to customize the approach for addressing each student's learning needs. ELO programs are crosscutting, pulling together students with different learning styles and diverse interests. A student advisor typically has schoolwide connections with the student body and an ability to help students select or create their own learning agenda. Some pilots relied on the ELO coordinator position to serve this role, and others pulled in the school guidance counselor.



– Community partner, Belfast ELO programs are closely aligned with local workforce needs and efforts to address local challenges. Communitybased learning components increase familiarity with local industries and build awareness of local social and economic challenges, enabling students to contribute to finding potential solutions. Recommended actions include developing community partnerships and identifying specific mentoring opportunities for students.

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a. Finding community partners with an interest in identifying the next generation of workers allows ELO programs to be strategic in helping to address the limited availability of skilled workers in the local



A student from RSU 71 (Belfast) Area High School partially submerged in an indoor pool with scuba diving gear.

economy. This process typically starts with direct outreach to community organizations, businesses, and public agencies to explore opportunities and mutual benefits. As these longer-term connections are developed, each entity might provide multiple placements for students or accommodate requests for one-off presentations or field trips.

b. Mentors provide students with positive adult role models who demonstrate the value of academic, social, and emotional skills in a real-life setting. Individuals in the community can provide students with ongoing guidance and support through regular one-on-one contact, usually set up through an internship, ongoing job shadowing, or series of meetings to support an independent study program.

Community-based learning opportunities offered by ELO programs are best combined with experiential learning at school to help ensure students' mastery of core academic content areas. Immediate access to a physical environment enables a school to introduce nontraditional, hands-on curricula that immerse students in the local landscape and heritage. For example, school administrative unity (SAU) Traip Academy in Kittery is right on the Piscataqua River, and the RSU 44 (Telstar) school complex in Bethel has wetlands to study and maple trees to tap. The ability to adapt learning to the *existing* environment proved critical for RREV ELO programs even as schools pursued plans to develop new community-based learning placements and construct new facilities on their campuses.

A participatory process informs effective program design and implementation. Successful ELO programs emerge and evolve through a phased-in approach, with key stakeholder groups helping to plan and refine the program to address the needs of students and the community.

a. Students can play a leadership role to help ensure a relevant and effective ELO program. RREV teams experimented with different content and arrangements to gauge student interest and



explore how best to increase engagement while building competencies. At RSU 44 (Telstar) High School, a small group of students in a design class surveyed the entire student body to design an outdoor learning pavilion and other learning spaces. Traip Academy started with a small group of students enrolled in a new credit-bearing Marine Changemaker class while also testing out other activities outside of school hours, such as a State of the Harbor exercise testing the use of an underwater remote operated vehicle (ROV) to survey a debris field after a yacht sank.

b. Plans for family and community engagement can be integrated into program design. ELO pilots solicited input from parents early on by inviting them to information sessions and administering surveys to explore attitudes and priorities. Creative approaches to family engagement included family nights at Telstar's new firepit and pizza oven, and community cooking classes in the renovated kitchen at Jonesport-Beals High School (School Union 103). Ongoing support from parents or guardians is critical to enable permission for out-of-school activities, facilitate transportation, and promote a culture shift endorsing nontraditional learning. Parents also often work in the community and can help to bridge learning needs and workforce needs.

c. Activities can be adapted or scaled up based on participant feedback and community interest. ELO pilots collected input from students through exit surveys at the end of courses and sometimes surveyed parents or community members to inform design changes. This approach led

to program expansions in the second year. For the RSU 71 Belfast Area High School Marine Institute, this meant adding new courses—including specialized physics and chemistry "of the ocean" courses—and increasing enrollment numbers.

Activities to increase student engagement and provide adaptive support are critical. ELO programs can serve students with different interests and learning styles, and they typically embrace an interdisciplinary approach to learning designed to address the range of student needs and career aspirations present in a community with socioeconomic diversity. However, students who could benefit might be hesitant to enroll in new programs, so intentional methods are needed to increase student engagement and achievement.

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"If we want to reform rural education, we need to leave the 1950s. We have to step outside and create a culture of customizing education for kids to meet their needs. Then our kids know they are valued."

> – Administrator, Telstar

- a. Starting with a flexible structure to attract students can be an effective approach for increasing student engagement. Two schools provided the option for students to try new courses at first as electives rather than having to rely on these programs for core academic credits. ELO pilots also planned events to generate student interest, such as offering an electives fair before class registration and holding a well-publicized logo contest for the new program.
- b. Active monitoring and support helps students to thrive in nontraditional learning pathways. Each ELO program had a dedicated advisor or coordinator assigned to help students customize their learning plans and check in on their progress. Additional support was offered in cases where students were conducting independent studies, earning credit through internships, or completing individual capstone projects. Examples include scheduling a seminar for students to gather weekly to discuss progress and challenges and having students complete structured journaling exercises to facilitate self-reflection and course correction when needed.





Mycelium buoys stored at Traip Academy in Kittery.

- 7 It is never too early to think about sustainability. A new ELO program might rely on an initial pool of funding for design and piloting that is not expected to support long-term program implementation. The RREV experience highlighted the following strategies to help ensure that startup funding leads to a sustainable initiative.
 - a. Integrate funding needs for new curricula into the regular school budget cycle.
 - b. Develop a maintenance plan for new physical structures and equipment, which might rely on formal budget support, partnerships with community organizations, or dedicated individual volunteers.
 - c. Find complementary initiatives and funding sources supporting similar nontraditional learning philosophies.
 - d. Use startup funding mostly for nonrecurring expenses, such as to build infrastructure, purchase equipment, and develop curriculum.

