

The Value of Extended Learning Opportunities: Rationale and Results

Key findings from ICF's external evaluation



Background

This document summarizes key findings from ICF's external evaluation of the Maine Department of Education's Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program. RREV is funded by a \$16.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Rethink K-12 Education Models program and is intended to promote innovation in Maine schools so that all students across the state have access to high-quality and responsive learning opportunities. Since August 2021, over 40 school districts throughout Maine have been awarded federal funding from RREV to support innovative education pilot projects, including five Extended Learning Opportunities programs.

About Extended Learning Opportunities

The Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) concept provides hands-on credit-bearing experiences for students outside of the traditional classroom, with an emphasis on community-based career exploration. RREV awards supported schools in rethinking how to design or expand ELO activities that could better leverage local assets and address students' learning needs. Participating students have opportunities to develop college, career, and life skills through new interdisciplinary curricula for place-based learning and through internships, job shadowing, work-study, and field trips.

Why Extended Learning Opportunities Are Important and Innovative

ICF's evaluation identified several reasons why ELO programs are innovative:

- 1 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. For example, regional school unit (RSU) 44 (Telstar) High School students surveyed the student body (9th–12th grades) to explore preferences for the new Local Ecology and Aspirations Pathway (LEAP) program and to inform the design of eco-friendly learning spaces. Their plans for an outdoor pavilion and greenhouse required understanding building permit procedures, wetland conditions, and design features that allow for the natural flow of water through the environment.
- 2 Inclusivity** – ELO programs are designed to be flexible and accommodate students regardless of their learning abilities, career aspirations, and access to transportation. The RSU 71 (Belfast) Area High School—(BAHS)—Marine Institute for example caters to a diverse socioeconomic community by supporting combined programs such as marine biology research and marine diesel technology exploration in the same classroom.
- 3 Real-World Relevance** – ELO students 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. For example, students at Traip Academy in Kittery learn how advances in shipbuilding and repair at the nearby Portsmouth Naval Shipyard now require the workforce to have science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degrees, and they also explore careers tied to the fishing and lobster industries and local tourism.

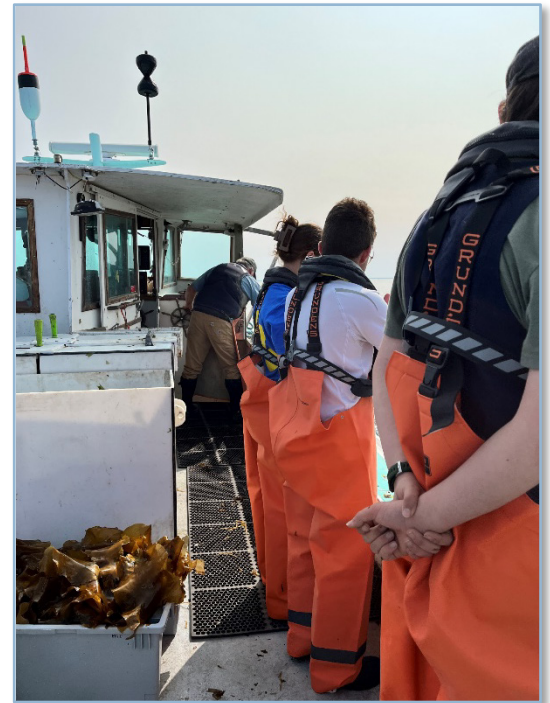
"She was able to have very tailored instruction and learning, fantastic field trips to very relevant community partners. It was...key to my student's inclusion in the school and success this year."

– Parent

4 Community Connections – Expanded opportunities for field work, service learning, and internships are designed to build long-lasting connections between students and the community. ELO programs reflect a shift away from the one-off field trip model for more reflective and sustained engagements with community organizations, businesses, or public agencies. At Harpswell Coastal Academy, community-based learning included a reflective journaling component for all students, a dedicated seminar for students with internships, mentoring, job shadowing placements, and a capstone project for seniors.

5 Leveraging Natural Resources – Students gain hands-on opportunities to develop practical job and life skills by learning about and using existing resources around them. The BAHS Marine Institute successfully applied for Limited Purpose Aquaculture licenses, and students are now harvesting kelp from three 400-foot kelp lines in Penobscot Bay. Also, an instructor from the Maine Maritime Academy conducted a U.S. Coast Guard training course in the BAHS pool to certify students in saltwater safety.

6 Place-Based, Interdisciplinary Learning – New curricula provide students with opportunities to develop practical job and life skills while also learning about the local history, culture, and economy. These courses serve as an alternative pathway for students to demonstrate mastery of core academic content. For example, one unit offered through Telstar’s LEAP focused on nearby Rumford as a mill town and the power of the Androscoggin River. Student teams collected data, generated a series of “then and now” maps, and completed a project focused on one of four local industries (logging, agriculture, fishing, or tourism).



Students from RSU 71 (Belfast) Area High School on a boat preparing to harvest kelp, above, and the kelp they harvested below.



Results

Here are some emerging outcomes ICF has found at RREV schools implementing ELO pilots:

- 1 More Engaged Students** – Schools with ELO programs experienced increased enrollment over the 2022–2023 school year in the alternative learning pathways. Teachers reported that students who had failed in a traditional classroom setting started to attend school more regularly and flourished with project-based learning, “doing fantastic work” and “getting great grades.”
- 2 Academic Growth and Confidence** – Most (87%) surveyed students agreed that their school’s pilot helped them learn. Across the three ELO pilots under implementation at the end of the 2022–23 school year, 85% of students enrolled in the new courses earned passing grades that reflected adequate content mastery.
- 3 Increased Mental and Emotional Wellness** – Students and teachers alike described a “happier” learning environment. Reports from students included that “our voices seemed to matter this year,” “we were excited to take charge of our own learning,” and “I am so happy not to be stuck in a chair.” Teachers and administrators also described improvements to their own social-emotional wellness, reporting the pilot to be “one of the most rewarding professional experiences” and that “being able to pass knowledge on is super exciting.”



Mycelium buoys stored at Traip Academy in Kittery.

- 4 Community Partnerships** – All of the ELO programs developed new community connections to provide students with experiential learning opportunities. For example, the BAHS Marine Institute added 60 new placements for students during the 2022–23 school year to complete student internships, job shadowing, and paid work experience.
- 5 Improved Employment Opportunities** – Participants in these programs gain awareness of local industries and some earn new certifications or other credentials before graduation. For example, Irving Forest Products Sawmill and the Maine Forestry Collaborative help Telstar students explore forestry careers, whereas BAHS students explore careers in the maritime or marine industries. A graduating BAHS senior earned her Coast Guard Fishing Vessel Drill Conductor Certification.
- 6 Adoption of New Learning Models** – ELO programs piloted with RREV support have enabled schools to test, refine, and institutionalize new approaches for engaging at-risk students and better preparing all students for the transition after graduation. These promising programs will continue to benefit future cohorts of students. The BAHS Marine Institute recently received the 2022–23 Excellence in Environmental Education Award from the Maine Environmental Education Association in recognition of its “innovation and creativity in providing the highest quality environmental education programming in the State of Maine.”

“These classes have them talking, excited—it makes school ‘fun.’ ”

– Parent