



Complementary Learning

What is complementary learning?

Educators, policymakers, and families increasingly agree: schools cannot do it alone. Children need multiple opportunities to learn and grow—at home, in school, and in the community. Complementary learning is a comprehensive strategy for addressing all of these needs and ensuring success for all children and youth. Complementary learning is the idea that a systemic approach—which intentionally integrates both school and nonschool supports—can better ensure that all children have the skills they need to succeed.

What does complementary learning look like?

A complementary learning approach provides and aligns these beneficial opportunities:

- Effective schools
- Supportive families and opportunities for family engagement
- Early childhood programs
- Health and social services
- Out-of-school time activities (including sports, arts, and mentoring programs)
- Community-based and cultural institutions
- Colleges and universities

Complementary learning systems take many forms, from simple to complex. Examples include:

- Community and Beacon schools
- Children’s Zones, such as the Harlem Children’s Zone
- Coordinating organizations such as Alignment Nashville and Building Bright Futures
- Children’s cabinets and commissions

What’s different about complementary learning?

Traditional programs isolate services in separate silos. In contrast, complementary learning systems assure learning supports are intentionally connected. They:

- Align resources to maximize efficiency
- Create a web of opportunity so that no child falls through the cracks
- Provide disadvantaged children enriching opportunities that are the norm for middle class children
- Promote success from birth through adolescence so that all children are ready to enter school and ready to exit

Learn more about Complementary Learning at
www.hfrp.org

Related Resources

Visit www.hfrp.org to find these and other valuable resources:

The Federal Role in Out-of-School Learning: After-School, Summer Learning, and Family Involvement as Critical Learning Supports

A research-based case for the federal provision of out-of-school complementary learning supports.

The Evaluation Exchange: Complementary Learning

This spring 2005 issue introduces and explores the concept of complementary learning.

The Evaluation Exchange: Building the Future of Family Involvement

The Spring 2008 issue redefines family involvement within a complementary learning framework, which recognizes the critical role of families and other non-school supports in promoting children’s success.



What does Complementary Learning Look Like in Practice?

Marcus's Story

Marcus is 14 years old. He lives with his younger sister and his mother, who cleans houses for a living and hopes that her children will be the first in the family to go to college. Marcus has never heard the term “complementary learning,” but he lives it every day.

Establishing a strong foundation in early childhood

As a toddler, Marcus attended the Head Start center at the local public school, where staff members encouraged his mother to volunteer in the classroom and shared suggestions about how to help Marcus learn to read at home. When it was time to move to kindergarten, Head Start teachers introduced Marcus and his mother to his new teacher. Together, this group of adults talked with each other and with Marcus about what to expect in kindergarten, about his strengths and needs, and about making a smooth transition. Marcus's mother, who had never had good relationships with teachers when she was a child, quickly developed trust in the welcoming new teacher and became increasingly involved at school over the next few years. She also learned about the school-based health clinic and ensured that Marcus visited on a regular basis, first to receive his immunizations and then to receive annual health screenings.

Broadening horizons in elementary school

After a successful transition, Marcus progressed through elementary school, where several teachers recognized his talent for singing and mentioned this to his mother. His mother encouraged him to sing in the church choir, and his third-grade teacher helped him find an after school program that taught music and helped students write songs based on the books they were reading in school. Through the after school program, Marcus discovered a love for reading, and his grades improved dramatically. Staff members also helped him apply for and win a scholarship to an overnight arts camp that he attended the summer after seventh grade.

Looking toward the future middle school and beyond

Now in eighth grade, Marcus plans to attend college and hopes to become a music professor. He and his mother recently attended a college night cosponsored by school guidance counselors, local universities, and the local YMCA, where he plays basketball after school. Marcus has a good chance of accomplishing his dreams because he has been surrounded since early childhood with a network of learning supports. Each learning opportunity has opened doors to others because of the concerted efforts of parents, teachers, and other adults to work together to build a ladder of success and keep Marcus on the path to college. Even if he never hears the words “complementary learning,” Marcus will achieve its—and his—goals.

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