



## **Enhancing Learning with External Learning Providers**

### **Recommendations for Creating Beneficial Partnerships Between Residency Artists and Schools**

#### **Winooski School District and Circus Smirkus**

The “Integrating Expanded Learning Opportunities into Personalized Learning Plans and Flexible Pathways to Graduation” grant program of the Vermont Agency of Education was offered in March 2017 to allow “schools to work with Expanded Learning Providers to create exemplars of external learning opportunities that can be incorporated into student PLPs [Personalized Learning Plans] and count toward graduation requirements.” (“Integrating Expanded Learning Opportunities Grant Application 2017.” Vermont Agency of Education. March 10, 2017.)

Specific objectives of this program described in the grant application were to create shared learning targets and performance scales, modify internal and external learning opportunities to incorporate these shared learning targets, and create a process by which a student’s external learning experience can be endorsed by their school.

Winooski School District was the recipient of one such grant and partnered with Circus Smirkus to create and implement this program in the fall of 2017. This document serves as a set of generalized guidelines and recommendations to help other External Learning Providers (ELPs) to successfully partner with schools and school districts to provide meaningful, measurable impacts for participating students.

The overall project can be divided into five key phases:

1. Develop the Scope of Project
2. Define the Targeted Areas of Learning
3. Create Rubrics and Measurement Tools to Assess Student Learning
4. Conduct ELP Learning Opportunities
5. Assess Program Impact & Improve Service Delivery

The partnership has reflected on each of these project phases and offers the following guidelines and recommendations to benefit future school-ELP partnerships and create lasting, measurable change for Vermont students.

### Phase One: Develop the Scope of Project

In this first planning phase, overall project goals are defined; anticipated activities and deliverables are outlined; and a timeline for activities is created, including specific dates for project milestones and key events. In particular, be certain to allow sufficient time for the creation and adaptation of learning objectives and assessment tools in advance of the delivery of the external learning opportunity.

The members of the project team should be identified from the outset of the project, regardless of their participation in any early phases. At minimum, team members should include ELPs and their support staff, school administration, classroom educators, and external consultants as required. It is important to recruit people who are a good match to the needs of the project in considering their expertise, interest, and availability.

Retaining one team member to serve as the project manager and administrator greatly facilitates this communication and overall planning and implementation of the project. Additionally, having a diverse team of area experts can allow for delegation of specific areas to be done efficiently and with great accuracy.

Regular communication among all team members is essential in keeping the project focused, coordinated, and on track. The relatively recent advent of online scheduling and communication tools (e.g. Doodle scheduling, Skype and Zoom webconferences, etc.) is a great asset for any project administrator.

### Phase Two: Define the Targeted Areas of Learning

It is assumed that the ELP will be familiar with the educational goals and curriculum of the program. These goals and key lessons should be documented and available for review by the team members. If not, it is strongly recommended that this step is included within the project timeline; it need not be replicated for every project unless significant changes have been made to the curriculum.

In collaboration with classroom educators and school administrators, the ELP should review the school-specific learning goals that may be eligible to be targeted by the planned intervention. The student learning goals that will be best addressed by the ELP are those that are most directly correlate with the content of the curriculum. The Winooski-Smirkus collaboration found that these conversations were most fruitful when held in person, though we recognize this may not be possible in all cases.

One tool that has proven useful in demonstrating the crossover between the external learning opportunity and the student learning goals is an alignment guide: a grid that places these curriculum elements side-by-side with educational goals, defining the relationship and describing the means by which this learning will be promoted. In

creating this document, we have found it helpful to review all Grade Expectations (GXs) and elements of the proposed residency.

Using areas of strong correlation between the curriculum and school learning objectives, select a limited number of educational goals to assess for impact. Be realistic in what the ELP can provide; having too many learning goals may dilute the potential impact of a focused effort to address two or three specific objectives.

### Phase Three: Create Rubrics and Measurement Tools to Assess Student Learning

Following the identification of the targeted learning goals, the team should develop tools to meaningfully observe and measure student progress toward those goals. While some goals may not be measurable directly, proximal factors more conducive to measurement or observation may be identified by referencing the Alignment Guide described in Phase Two.

Assessment tools might include a wide range of forms: direct observation, student surveys, reflection assignments, activities, among others. Student journaling in response to prompted questions was found to be a particularly potent source of qualitative data, though this may not be appropriate for all settings.

In developing or adapting these tools, the assessments must be appropriate to the age and ability of the participating students. If possible and appropriate, piloting the assessment tools among a similar student group can help to identify any problems with the measurements in advance of the program. The contribution of professional educators to this process cannot be underestimated.

The initial creation of alignment guides and assessment tools can be time-consuming and labor intensive, although future program replication and adaptation is expedited after this initial investment of effort.

In creating these tools, input is needed from many parties, and managing multiple schedules over the period of development can be a challenge. The Winooski-Smirkus partnership found online collaboration tools to be vital to this process. Platforms like Google Docs and Sheets allow for multiple editors to access the documents simultaneously and these products' version tracking features can help to prevent loss of work.

### Phase Four: Conduct ELP Learning Opportunities

Though not possible in every case, the Winooski-Smirkus partnership observed that daily contact with students creates a foundational relationship that supports the learning environment and promotes growth in the program's educational objectives.

We believe that longer duration experiences of 6 or more weeks are required for the student contact hours necessary to cultivate measurable student development.

Monitoring and assessment should not be seen as separate from the overall ELP offering. When conducting a program in which student learning will be measured and considered for the fulfillment of their learning objectives and grade expectations, assessments must be integrated into the fabric of the program delivery plans.

Ensure that a baseline measurement is established for any areas that are expected to demonstrate change in student performance and behavior as a result of program delivery. For an extended external learning opportunity, the ELP may consider conducting a midpoint assessment to give insight into the learning process over time. Even if experience with early measurements suggests a substantial change to the assessment methods, it is best to not change these tools partway through the program; measurements using different tools may not be comparable, thereby negating any ability to measure change in student capacity or behavior.

For any observational assessments, the staff conducting the evaluations should be trained in these tools in advance and should be well-versed in the rubrics that apply to their areas of observation. Additionally, we recommend that student feedback is collected at the time of program delivery; response rates for surveys and other student inputs tends to decline if completed off-site.

#### Assess Program Impact & Improve Service Delivery

Data from the program monitoring efforts must be collected in order to demonstrate student progress toward the defined learning objectives of the program. These data must be shared with the classroom educators, in order that student progress toward student-directed learning goals and grade expectations are applied according to the school's policies and practices.

Quantitative data may be collated and analyzed to indicate the relative progress toward goals, in regard to both individual performance as compared to the larger student body, as well as the developmental trends found within the student group collectively.

Qualitative data can provide rich insight into the student experience that may not be accessible through numerical analysis alone.

The ELP can also receive tremendous benefit from the observations and feedback of the measurement and assessment phase. Analysis of student learning can reveal areas of relative strength and weakness in the curriculum. Adopting a perspective of continual learning and improvement of both program structure and content can only benefit future generations of students who are exposed to the external learning opportunities provided.